

TYRANTS

Writing Poetry



Edited by
Albrecht Koschorke
and
Konstantin Kaminskij

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Introduction

ALBRECHT KOSCHORKE and KONSTANTIN KAMINSKIJ

I. POETRY ON TRIAL

In December 2010, news spread through the media that a young American named Johnny Logan Spencer had been sentenced to two years, nine months in jail because of a poem. The poem is titled “The Sniper.” In awkward verses it describes the murder of President Obama, who is also subject to racist invective. Spencer placed it on the net in 2007 under the username Pain1488, and then again following Obama’s assumption of office.¹ Judging the verses as “extremely dangerous,” the court ordered three years’ probation following the time in prison.²

In the poem, Obama is referred to as a “tyrant” while the sharpshooter sacrifices his own life as a “patriot.” Unknowingly, Spencer here tied his text to a long tradition of tyranomachic writing extending back to the period of early modern monarchies. His case recalls sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English legislation criminalizing even the thought of the ruler’s death, let alone giving the thought poetic expression. As is well-known, the twentieth century’s totalitarian regimes themselves considered poetry a political weapon and both banned it and criminalized it accordingly. In the liberal democracies, in contrast, an awareness of poetry’s potential explosiveness has largely vanished. Academic literary studies has contributed its share to

¹ <http://whitereference.blogspot.de/2010/02/johnny-logan-spencer-latest-thought.html> (January 13, 2016).

² <http://www.activistpost.com/2010/12/man-sentenced-to-nearly-3-years-in.html> (January 13, 2016). For background and context, see also Mel Ayton, *Hunting the President: Threats, Plots and Assassination Attempts—From FDR to Obama* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2014), 233.

this political neutralization—not least of all through the conventional wisdom that we may not equate the speaker in a literary text with its author: a methodologically well-grounded reservation, encountered by any college student taking an introductory course in literature, that nevertheless makes it difficult to tie literary texts together with political practice. By all accounts, the American court was not impressed by (and perhaps was not even aware of) this basic rule. In the poem's personal narrative stance, aiming the crosshairs of a rifle at the president as a murder victim, it saw a plain and simple reproduction of the author's wishes, and beyond that: his appeal to have deeds follow words.

A few years ago, whether or not poems expressed political intentions was a question figuring in discussions of an immeasurably more prominent case: that of the poet, psychiatrist, natural-healing instructor, and accused war criminal Radovan Karadžić. In an article published in the *Michigan Journal of International Law*, the jurist Jay Surdukowski emerged as the clearest proponent for having Karadžić's lyrics entered as incriminating evidence at the International Criminal Court. In the end, he argued, all forms of medial propaganda and political statements were drawn on in the upheaval. Hence: "Why should poetry, perhaps the most powerful maker of myth and in the Yugoslavia context, a great mover of dangerous men and women, be any different in the eyes of international law?"³

Using an expression coined by Slavoj Žižek, Surdukowski refers to the leader of the Kosovo Serbs as a "poet warrior"⁴ for whom the poetic word and military deed are inseparable. Where art and life correspond to such a degree, clear distinctions between author and lyric voice become impossible to maintain.⁵ This fusion of poets and warriors is presented with special clarity in a BBC documentary directed by Paweł Pawlikowski, who shows us a meeting between Karadžić and his Russian writer-colleague Eduard Limonov that took place in the mountains overlooking besieged

³ Jay Surdukowski, "Is Poetry a War Crime? Reckoning for Radovan Karadzic the Poet-Warrior," *Michigan Journal of International Law* 26 (2005): 677.

⁴ Ibid., 10. See the essay by Slavoj Žižek in this book. At the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, Gabrielle D'Annunzio refined the myth of the *poeta-condottiero*, thus offering a model for both Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of Italian Futurism, and Mussolini.

⁵ Surdukowski, "Is Poetry a War Crime?," 15.

Sarajevo. Here an organic unity seems to form, consisting of soldierly camaraderie, the circulating of the slivovitz bottle, the recitation of nationalist, chauvinistic verses, and the murder of civilians. (The uninterrupted shelling of and sniper assault on Sarajevo cost over 10,000 lives, including those of many children.) Where after brief technical instruction the poet Limonov fires off a machine gun salvo as if for fun, Karadžić speaks of having anticipated the battle for Sarajevo in his poems years beforehand.⁶ But since Karadžić himself is fulfilling his putative prophecy, Surdukowski believes that his earlier lyric production allows an inference of intentional action.⁷ According to international law, establishing intention on the part of a perpetrator is a requirement for a verdict of genocide.⁸ In the absence of a confession, the poems might serve as legal evidence.

2. THE BIPOLAR ORDER OF SPIRIT AND POWER

The poetic critique of rule—extending to an open call to depose or kill the ruler—is probably as old as poetry itself. It represents the reverse side of a relationship in which ruler and poet work to each other's advantage. Over many centuries, poetry was first and foremost court poetry, sponsored by the ruler or his closest retinue and correspondingly dependent on their favor. In return, the poet was obliged to offer panegyrics, legitimation, history, and entertainment. In this respect rulers were themselves dependent on the court poets, needing the mirror of poetically generated “doubles” to appear transfigured and complete to themselves and their subjects.⁹ In the framework of this mutual dependence, the poetic sovereign, creating a world from words, and the political sovereign, creating a world from deeds, could even be addressed as equals. Goethe, for instance, who possessed appropriate privileges, names poets “corulers” and speaks of a “poet-king.”¹⁰ In

⁶ “And many other poems have something of prediction, which frightens me sometimes.” Minutes of this statement also in Surdukowski, “Is Poetry a War Crime?,” 15.

⁷ Ibid., 5 and 15.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ See Louis Marin, *Le portrait du roi* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981), 55.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Westöstlicher Divan. Noten und Abhandlungen: künftiger Divan*, in *Goethes Werke, II: Gedichte und Epen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982), 198.

our own period this literary function of poetry in the more narrow sense has been transferred to the mass media, PR departments, and spin doctors.

We find accounts in antiquity underscoring the complexity and tension-filled relationship between the despot and the poet or philosopher. The greatest poets “sought out and praised” the courts of tyrants without appearing as flatterers, while for their part tyrants felt a need to “associate with philosophers.”¹¹ Political authority and literary *auctoritas* here entered into a kind of symbiosis. But if circumstances changed, a friendly interlocutor, apologist, or chief semantician could rapidly be suspected of high treason. The potentially extreme danger of the office of philosophical advisor is shown in the famous episode of Plato’s residence at the court of the tyrant Dionysios II of Syracuse and his subsequent flight to Athens (360 BCE).¹²

Whether friendly or hostile, ruler’s praise or critique—the split between power and spirit is a basic postulate for the political order, at least within a long European tradition. And this not despite but rather on account of its inherent tension, which oscillates between two possible results: fraternization or enmity. Within this doubled order, an observer stands by the regent, offering or denying him semantic credit, securing or removing agreement by the subjects. But at the same time, the two sides can deny their tacit cooperation, each then cultivating an image of its own completion. The political sovereign can consider himself the autocratic author of his own power (and as a rule strengthened in this regard by the poet); in turn art can declare itself pure and distant from power. This corresponds to the widespread idea that politics and poetry have little in common—to the cliché that they dwell in separate worlds. As conventional understanding would have it, the sometimes brutal business of governing can only be carried out at the price of distance from art, while the sense of poetic beauty best flourishes at a distance from actions executed at the pole of power.

See Albrecht Koschorke, “Macht und Fiktion,” in *Des Kaisers neue Kleider. Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft. Texte, Bilder, Lektüren*, ed. Thomas Frank et al. (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2002), 73–84.

¹¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956), vol. 5, 174f.

¹² See Ludwig Marcuse, *Plato and Dionysius: A Double Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1947).

3. AUTOCRATS AS AUTHORS

Dramatically contradicting this idea is the fact that violent rulers are often the greatest friends of art, in their own way, and indeed draw attention to themselves as artists. In doing so, they traverse the division between intellectual and political spheres, drawing the sovereignties of the artist and regent together into a single boundless claim to power. In the realm of such power-art, literary production plays a prominent role—together with, among other things, painting and architecture, theater and song.¹³ Here as well, antiquity offers many examples. The figure of Emperor Nero has become emblematic, his historiographers indicating that he tormented Rome's inhabitants not only through his atrocities but also through artistic offerings devoid of talent.¹⁴

When it comes to modernism's ideologies, literature represents an especially suitable laboratory, particularly since it has served as a breeding ground for the epoch's most powerful ideological force, nationalism. Tied to the exercise of executive power and strengthened through mass media, it forms what Slavoj Žižek terms a "poetic-military complex": a decisive factor in the dissolution and transformation of state structures. In such situations of upheaval, the personality type of the political activist driven by a simultaneous inclination toward literature and violence frequently arrives on the scene. In general a poetic vein apparently informs the capacity to lend political shape to radical ideas; tyrannical control of a state is thus often tied to an exorbitant pleasure in language. This is above all the case with charismatic rule, the leader's verbal violence here serving as an essential linkage between him and the people, hence as an element creating unity.

By and large, violent rulers have to initially generate political order, which is oriented around their persons, in extremely fragile external circumstances. Because they cannot rely on an already existing legitimacy

¹³ See Burkhard Müller, "Dichter und Lenker. Schwache Staaten brauchen starke Worte," the initial article in a section dedicated to the theme of "the literary axis of evil: hands covered with blood and fingers with ink—when scoundrels turn to writing," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 April 2003, 16. In an apt formulation, Müller emphasizes that "the alienating simultaneity of poetry and violence" has to be "understood as a unit" in the case of tyrants with a propensity for poetry.

¹⁴ Tacitus, *Annales*, 14, 14–16, and 16, 4–5. See Suetonius, *Nero*, 20–24.

basis and well-practiced automatisms, they are forced to be original, even if this means inventing a past they claim to inherit. In this manner the systems they establish will have the features of a fiction emerging from nothing and injected into reality. The despot can consequently feel himself to be the author of a gigantic artwork sprung purely from his own interior. All of this paradoxically places the most inhumane and brutal regimes in proximity to unreal aesthetic formations. An abysmal juncture here opens up between deed and spirit, the political will to form and its artistic counterpart, of which none of the participating parties, politicians, intellectuals, or artists, will usually wish to be reminded in more normal times.

In the twentieth century, the literary engagement of despots either in the making or already in power was by no means limited to openly propagandistic texts. It in fact covers a broad spectrum: from the founding of state-religious book cults (Hitler, Mao, Niyazov), to literary-critical submissions (Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, Kim Jong-il), to the writing of novels (al-Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein), and onward to the duet of rifle shots and lyric recitations (Karadžić). Speaking very generally, two literary phases can be distinguished in the biographies of tyrants. We first have the youthful poetry, which can still be politically nonspecific: Mao with his early landscape poems, Stalin under the influence of late Georgian romanticism.¹⁵ We might also admit Joseph Goebbels into this circle—the chief propagandist for the Nazi regime and its atrocities began as a novelist with expressionistic traits.¹⁶ To the extent that creative poetic powers are not paralyzed following a successful seizure of power, they are often steered by the idea of political artistry, of the state's renewal as a total work of art in which an echoing can be heard of European Romanticism and its heir, Richard Wagner—this even in the opera *Sea of Blood* by the erstwhile North Korean dictator Kim Il-sung. Let us note that sometimes artistic production taking place at the height of a tyrant's power bears witness to loneliness or indeed weariness of power, or at least purports to reveal this (Mussolini, al-Gaddafi).

¹⁵ Donald Rayfield, "Stalin the Poet," *PN Review* 11 (1985): 43–48.

¹⁶ On Goebbels' literary career and the different versions of his diary-novel *Michael*, see Kai Michel, *Vom Poeten zum Demagogen. Die schriftstellerischen Versuche Joseph Goebbels'* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

In the careers of twentieth-century tyrants, literary creation has different functions depending on the life phase. There is, to be sure, no general schema applicable to all the century's dictators; the circumstances from which their regimes emerged are simply too disparate for that. Nevertheless, with close scrutiny we can make out some repeated features. One path to dictatorial power proceeds via the army, an exemplary case here being Muammar al-Gaddafi, who took power through an officers' putsch in Libya in 1969. Born in a Bedouin tent, al-Gaddafi received a classical education after Koran school—culminating in elite British military training. However, his exposure to socialist and pan-Arabic propaganda served as a check on such Western influences. In his putsch and its aftermath, he could draw both ideologically and militarily on the example of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who after seizing power in Egypt in 1954 had published a book, written by a ghostwriter, called *The Philosophy of the Revolution*; the book would turn out highly influential not only in neighboring Libya.¹⁷ Al-Gaddafi appears to have seen through his putsch without help from Libya's traditional elites, rather being supported only by a group of young officers. In the first years he understood himself as a social modernizer, his anticolonial stance also resonating with Western intellectuals who saw him as a kind of desert Che Guevara. With his *Green Book*, published in 1975 under his name and championing a political order based on archaic tribal traditions as a "third way" between capitalism and communism, he tried to fill the normative vacuum marking his country in this period of upheaval. With Mao's *Little Red Book* as a model, the text ascribed to al-Gaddafi was meant to serve as a foundational work for the new Libyan state. It was required reading in schools and had constitutional status in all political questions.

Kim Il-sung likewise owed his political existence to the military—albeit not his own country's military but rather the Soviet army, which trained and deployed him. In both his literary work and his efforts to establish an autochthonous Korean socialism, Juche (or "self-reliance"), he would comport himself with all the more sweeping ambition.¹⁸ Characteristic for Kim

¹⁷ David Blundy and Andrew Lycett, *Qaddafi and the Libyan Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 40. See also Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 149–69.

¹⁸ Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 59 and 67.

and his colleagues in office (including the Arabic despots represented in this volume) is the veil he placed over his own family origins.

In fact, in an outline of the typology of such dictators, one regular feature that emerges is their humble and in every respect insignificant origin. In the official biographies, the family of origin is hardly mentioned and is covered over by ascription of a revolutionary persona. The reason for this is not difficult to pin down: Dictators are irregular rulers, neither stemming from a renowned genealogical line nor having been recruited by their own country's elite. Physically and in terms of legitimation, they come from nowhere and amount to all they are through a narrative turned backward to their careers and thus marking out a self-confirming circle. This ties their biographies to archaic myths of manliness whose structure includes retroactive eradication of the weakness of having been born, of heteronomous origins. But it also ties these myths to their modern version, transplanted to the aesthetic field, namely to the ideal of an artistic genius that creates itself without preconditions.

A second path to power is even more frequent and characteristic than a military career. Along this path, the decisive factor is a threshold phase within which a young man from a humble background and without means, in especially precarious life circumstances, comes into contact with a radical ideology that he tries to make his own rhetorically or as a writer. Literature here often facilitates arrival, the establishing of ties with a radical and frequently urban elite. Hitler can serve as an example of this process—although as is well-known the German dictator saw himself as a thwarted painter rather than writer, he has a place in the present collection having nonetheless become a verbal artist *sui generis*. In his Hitler biography, Ian Kershaw describes with great vividness how the future *Führer* roved around Linz as a work-shy and boastful bohemian, and how he later lived as a “dropout” in Vienna, decrepit and seedy, but also a manic reader and a political blusterer at his regular drinking table at the men's house.¹⁹ In his Munich time as well, he drew on this lifestyle.

The intellectual biography of later Serbian leader Karadžić follows a similar pattern. Karadžić has peasant origins that, like Hitler's, are some-

¹⁹ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, Vol. 1: 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000), 20ff., 31ff., 55ff.

what obscure.²⁰ In his years as a medical student at the University of Sarajevo, he tried to establish connections with the city's literary circles, where he would recite his poems and compositions while playing the gusla, the Serbian viola da gamba. But he was considered a rank amateur—in Marko Vesovic's words, a "hopeless case in respect to literature."²¹ Nevertheless, during a stay in Belgrade in 1975 he found a literary supporter in the novelist Dobrica Ćosić; apparently, he had also already received the Jovan Dučić award for poetry in 1969.²² In the following years he practiced psychiatry (including working with soccer clubs as a team psychiatrist) and tried his hand at different businesses. In the latter context, he came into conflict with the law and had to spend almost a year behind bars. A criminal background is, we should note, a consistent biographical trait of dictators, either on a small scale (Mussolini) or a large one (Stalin, wanted in Tiflis for bank robbery and murder; Saddam Hussein, making his living as a contract killer).

4. FROM THE BOHEMIAN WORLD TO A LATE STYLE

In many respects, the twentieth century's despots were self-made men, getting where they wished to go using both clean and dirty means. As indicated, on the path from nothing to the top of an autocratic regime, they often for a time led bohemian lives, in the process experiencing enduring

²⁰ His father has been described as an "itinerant with a history of incest and theft" (Robert M. Caplan, "Dr. Radovan Karadzic: Psychiatrist, Poet, Soccer Coach and Genocidal Leader," *Australasian Psychiatry* 11 [2003]: 75).

²¹ Ibid.

²² This information supplied by English-language Wikipedia. Likewise, in 1994 he was honored in Russia with the Sholokhov Prize for Literature and Art—a to be sure highly dubious award, established in 1992, that has been given to, among others, Fidel Castro, the White Russian dictator Aleksander Lukashenko, and in 2002 even Slobodan Milošević after he had already been incarcerated in The Hague (for "his courage, vigilance and his selfless resistance to injustice in the struggle for citizens' rights and the freedom of Yugoslav and other Slavonic peoples, for exposing, in the sessions of the 'International Hague Tribunal,' the Nato-US aggression in Europe" ("Moscow: SHOLOKHOV PRIZE TO MILOSEVIC," The Mail Archive, 24 May 2002, <http://www.mail-archive.com/news@antic.org/msg03067.html>), January 13, 2016.

political radicalization. In Hannah Arendt's words, they were recruited from the "mob," "the strata of riffraff among their people":

Hitler's biography reads like a textbook example in this respect, and the point about Stalin is that he comes from the conspiratory apparatus of the Bolshevik party with its specific mixture of outcasts and revolutionaries. Hitler's early party, almost exclusively composed of misfits, failures, and adventurers, indeed represented the "armed bohemians" who were only the reverse side of bourgeois society and whom, consequently, the German bourgeoisie should have been able to use successfully for its own purposes.²³

Future despots are infected with the ideas they then claim to serve as part of a nervous, bombastic underground, one searching in all directions and inclined toward both conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Included here are thus the overwrought and mad ideas particular to intellectually precarious milieus. Furthermore, within this chronically unsettled environment, representing something like the old society's inner periphery, are companions from other strata, first mentors, publishers, supporters, and so forth. Here the politically still inexperienced aspiring dictator (a "son of the people" with no relationships) is brought together not only with the semantic assets but also the communicative network of the society's intellectual, financial, and military elites.²⁴

None of this has the character of the institutionally ordered career training through which leadership is recruited in normal times. The reason for this is not limited to the future leaders' marginal origins. Frequently their rise to power takes place in a period when the system of education and training is itself experiencing upheaval, along a cultural borderline between local traditionalism and cosmopolitan modernization. In this way, young Stalin was the beneficiary of an educational expansion taking place in the context of Georgia's Russification. At the Orthodox priests' seminary in Tiflis where he received his training, conversing in Georgian was strictly

²³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1973), 317.

²⁴ See Walter Görlitz, *Geldgeber der Macht. Wie Hitler, Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, Mussolini, Stalin, Tito ihren Aufstieg zur Macht finanzierten* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1976).

forbidden, as was reading Western European literature. But this did not prevent Stalin from organizing a nightly literary circle in the dormitory and having poems written in Georgian published in nationalist papers.²⁵ Like other future revolutionaries on the periphery of the czarist empire, including Trotsky, Stalin was caught at this time between as it were the millstones of differing educational standards: those grounded in nationalist striving, imperial Russification, and Marxist internationalism. In this respect the situation of the anticolonial dictators of the Arabic region was not so different: Facing contradictory circumstances, they felt forced not only to reinvent themselves but the entire educational system as well.

For tyrants to start on their autodidactic path, a number of factors thus come together. At the center of their personal myth stands the idea of having worked their way up solely through their own capacities, thanks to unyielding self-assuredness and faith in their mission. This includes an ideological self-fashioning making use of the existing *weltanschauung* but giving them an individual stamp in a sense certified by the claim to original authorship. This can take place in different ways. In distinction to both Mussolini's writing, which preserved a private note (as autobiography and literary obituaries for his son and his brother), and Stalin's, whose authorship was frequently masked, Nazism placed a single book that Hitler wrote in the Landsberg prison at the center of its semantic force field, treating it with elements of sacral veneration. Later dictators would follow the example of this monocentric, quasi-sacral authorship (Mao's *Little Red Book*, al-Gaddafi's *Green Book*, Niyazov's *Ruhnama*).

Founding the claim to power, this *weltanschauung* prose itself bears all the hallmarks of the domineering autodidact. It leans toward compilation and over broad stretches is still marked by the excitement of the despot's years of apprenticeship, with their heated debates and avid eclecticism. But its aim is to transfer the results of such *weltanschauung*-focused storm and stress into a fixed, inviolable system of dogmas. In this phase of the autocratic author's creativity, the goal of consolidation is thus foregrounded, especially since once arrived in power, the dictator regularly faces a double challenge: he has to subdue the revolutionary energies that

²⁵ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), 49ff., 52ff.

brought him to office, which means a turn away from earlier avant-gardist positions; and he has to defend himself against rising competing currents. This leads to his writing now becoming bureaucratically fossilized, taking on an element of persistent repetitiveness, and above all—since realized dictatorship has no opposite parties, hence no objects for debate—a propensity for tautologies sealing themselves off into empty self-complacency. Even already fought out struggles are rewritten and adapted to the dictator's omnipotence, as Evgeny Dobrenko exemplifies through Stalin's writings in his contribution to this volume. In the end, even the heroic saga of the struggle for power thus slips into a tautological circle, without being any the less possessed with the paranoid omnipresence of a simultaneously threatening and yet always already defeated ideological enemy.

When space remains for "private" literary activities alongside the effort to set ideological norms, other motifs and stylistic elements come to the fore. It is striking how whenever authors try to show something like a personal side, the style spills into saccharine sentimentality. Saddam Hussein's novel *Zabiba and the King* is here a good example, as are al-Gaddafi's novelistic efforts and, earlier already, Mussolini's dirges for brother and son, all of these texts falling into a personally tragic, indeed resigned tone. That tyrants revel in self-pity, consider themselves the poorest of people and pine for the love of their subjects was an antique topos at least starting with Xenophon's *Hieron* dialog.²⁶ But behind the false and sometimes euphonious placidity for which authors such as Pol Pot (a great admirer of Verlaine's Symbolist verse) are known,²⁷ the harsh opposition between friend and enemy holding these texts upright reveals the menace of such gestures of closeness. Usually stylistic sureness declines when confrontation and hateful discourse no longer set the tone. The gentler sentiments

²⁶ Xenophon, "Hieron oder über die Tyrannis," in *Über Tyrannis. Eine Interpretation von Xenophons "Hieron" mit einem Essay über Tyrannis und Wahrheit von Alexandre Kojève*, ed. Leo Strauss (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1963), 7–29. (Xenophon's text is not included in the English edition: Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero* [New York: Political Science Classics, 1948].)

²⁷ See Soth Polin, "The Diabolic Sweetness of Pol Pot," in *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writing from Cambodia*, ed. Frank Stuart and Sharon May (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 21, 23–25.

quickly shift into turgidity and kitsch, constantly relying on melodramatic orchestration. Much could be said about this proximity between terror and melodrama. In general much needs to be done on the terrain of “comparative dictatorology.”

5. TERROR AND FICTION

If this collection is informed by a rather loose idea of what comprises “literature,” then the reason for this is not only that the twentieth century’s poet-despots offer no unified picture and can only be partly reduced to a common denominator. It is also because in one way or another all of them enact the artistic avant-garde heritage emerging at the century’s start, which, as is well-known, wanted to bring art into life and fuse art with it—a program already formulated by Richard Wagner, who for his part stood “under the influence of Bakunin’s revolutionary ideas.”²⁸ In their view that political rulers are artists of the highest caliber, Mussolini, Hitler, and Goebbels were at one with Russian Constructivists such as Kazimir Malevich. Even if the commonplace image for this was that of a sculptor needing to form the people like, in Mussolini’s words, a “block of precious material”²⁹ (leading to the option of ascribing political failure to the inadequacy of this “material”), the most important medium for the forming process was the spoken or written word. As was already the case with the nation in the nineteenth century,³⁰ the dictators’ “people” is a product of verbal artifice—a fiction transferred from an idea into empirical reality.

Hannah Arendt has offered what probably remains the most incisive analysis of such totalitarian pseudo-worlds. What distinguishes totalitarian leaders, she indicates, is not so much their talent for demagoguery as

²⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Limits of Arts: Two Essays* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010), 4.

²⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 71. Similarly Goebbels: “To form the *Volk* from a mass and a state from the *Volk*, that is always the deepest sense of a true politics.... The statesman is also an artist. For him the *Volk* is nothing other than what stone is for a sculptor. Leader and mass, that is no more a problem than is, for instance, painter and paint” (Joseph Goebbels, *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern* [Munich: Eher, 1929], 31).

³⁰ See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990).

“rather the simple-minded, single-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of another, entirely fictitious world.”³¹ From a certain moment onward the terror of such regimes is no longer aimed at enemies, but rather solely at sealing off the “consistency” of the created “fictitious world” against any claims of reality, indeed against the possibility of conceiving such claims.³² The terror renders itself independent of pragmatic considerations, becoming its own goal, or more precisely: it becomes “the actual content of totalitarian regimes.”³³ Consequently, otherwise than what is commonly believed the terror does not benefit from the verbal possibilities of a pseudo-world’s delusion. Precisely the opposite is the case: fiction, not wishing to see its inner consistency disturbed, summons up terror for the sake of its self-realization.

6. ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Most of the following chapters are studies of twentieth-century poet-despots, presented in the order of their takeover of power. This selection of poet-despots makes no claim to completeness—chapters are missing on, for example, Pol Pot and the Ayatollah Khomeini, together, no doubt, with different African and Latin American despots. The volume is also not meant to offer a theory of despotism, but rather simply to illuminate some of its most surprising and counterintuitive aspects (these in any case meriting a central place in a theory of despotism). Throughout the essays, the concepts of “despot,” “tyrant,” and “dictator” will not be strictly distinguished: the history of these concepts has proceeded in an inconsistent and closely interconnected way; and in addition many of the essays have been translated from German, which has different terminological conventions than English.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1973), 362.

³² *Ibid.*, 362.

³³ *Ibid.*, 422.

A complementary aspect is the role of politically active poets in post-totalitarian societies in transition, above all in respect to Eastern Europe, where there were more writer-politicians than in the western half of the continent, as Árpád Göncz, a Hungarian writer and first elected president of the country, pointed out in a speech delivered at the University of Georgia on 23 January 1991. Following 1990, in many former Eastern Bloc countries authors who had been dissidents became the first democratically elected presidents. The spectrum of political options evident here is broad: alongside democratic success stories (Václav Havel in what is now the Czech Republic, Árpád Göncz in Hungary, Lennart Meri in Estonia, Zhe-lyu Zhelev in Bulgaria, and Ibrahim Rugova in Kosovo), we find an instrumentalization of intellectuals by old communist political elites (Mircea Dinescu and Ana Blandiana in Romania), and finally an installation of nationalist “democratorships” in the Balkans (Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, Dobrica Ćosić in Serbia, and Radovan Karadžić in Bosnia).³⁴

The great political turn unfolding in the early 1990s in the huge geopolitical area extending from the Bering Strait to Central Europe can only partly be explained in terms of the Soviet Union’s defeat in the Cold War’s economic and military competition. After twenty years, it remains somewhat of a riddle how dissidents between Berlin and Moscow could in the end manage to win out over the repressive mechanisms of a Communist Party apparatus on whose mercy they seem to have completely depended.³⁵ No serious financial (not to speak of military) support was available for the

³⁴ In an essay collection published in 1994, Dubravka Ugrešić outlined some distinct features of former Yugoslavia’s political-literary systems. The cultural politics and medial representation of Tuđman, Ćosić, and Karadžić are here described as “nationalistic populism and intellectual neo-fascism.” Through Yugoslavia’s early split with Stalinism and connected rapprochement with the West, a highly developed dissident culture never emerged in the country—a fact leaving a strong mark on the situation of intellectuals throughout the Balkans. Both Tuđman and Ćosić were respected figures in Yugoslavia’s cultural bureaucracy. Ugrešić describes the outbreak of war in the Balkans as a kind of poetic metamorphosis, in the sense of a realizing of metaphors stemming from Ćosić and Karadžić. See Dubravka Ugrešić, *Die Kultur der Lüge* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 83ff.; English version: *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998).

³⁵ The role of international networks such as the various PEN clubs in any case here merits separate consideration.

dissidents' struggle; the maneuvering room of the authors involved was limited to repeatedly articulating the semantic bankruptcy of the different authoritarian regimes. Their collapse inevitably led to a normative vacuum demanding entirely new political authorship. This need, in a transitional period marked by the deepest crisis, is very likely what brought poets into the highest state offices. It would appear that the poet's power over the word, and thus over the narrative production of social syntheses, or put otherwise, semantic competence in the evocation of national traditions and narratives of identity, has endowed power over language with the authority of state. The results of this process have of course not only been salutary. Nevertheless, a strong reconciliatory current is present in the fact that in the twentieth century's political history, poets had a key function not only on the path toward revolutionary dictatorships but also on that of their overcoming and the subsequent rebuilding of civil social structures.

Translated by Joel Golb

The Tyrant with His Back to the Wall: Nero's Artistic Self-Expansion

ULRICH GOTTER

Why Nero, actually? Truly, he has already had an unprecedented reception as a prototypical tyrant of the ancient world. Today if one were asked to name any three villains of antiquity, Nero would most certainly be one of them. Under such conditions, it is also consistent to include him as the only “classical” example among the poet-despots of modern times, as a sort of paradigmatic opener. On second look, however, his privileged association with the grand poet-criminals of the twentieth century is more of a cliché, with only a narrow foundation in reality. For what Nero actually perpetrated—for instance, in the number of his victims—is hardly comparable with the mass murderers of modernity. His name cannot be connected with any large-scale purges, genocides, or forced collectivizations with myriads of deaths. He cannot even be linked to wars of expansion, which would have been deemed ordinary and hardly objectionable under Roman norms. It is not that there were not such cases in the history of the Roman Empire before (and after) him. Yet when measured against other Roman autocrats—even against those of particularly high repute with posterity—Nero’s record was remarkably bloodless. By comparison, that great European statesman Caesar estimated that he butchered over a million people in his conquest of Gaul.¹ And if we add to that the victims of the civil war unleashed by him, then we get numbers that truly compete in a modern context. And then there is Augustus who was after all the creator of the Roman monarchy and much lauded “emperor of the *Pax Romana*.” He decimated the Roman people, and especially the Roman aristocracy, with unrivaled efficiency in civil wars that he almost

¹ Plutarch, *Caesar*, 15, 5.

single-handedly instigated. Nor are there precise tallies of the losses from his wars in Germania, Pannonia, Raetia, Spain, Asia Minor, Egypt, and North Africa, despite the fact that these military campaigns should be counted among the worst premodern exterminations of human history.² Compared with these “achievements,” the much-maligned Nero wasn’t much more than a (little) orphan. The colonial wars the young ruler was compelled to conduct in Britain and Judea resulted from uprisings that his regime neither sought nor provoked. Even the successful war against the Parthians, which he let his general, Corbulo, conduct, had been forced upon him.³ Nero had no military ambitions. Nor did he visit troops either when there was an emergency or maneuvers were being staged. Given all that, how did we come to have the grave image of Nero as a dark despot, an image reflected in almost all ancient, medieval, as well as in most modern texts? The likely solution to this enigma is that Nero—at least in terms of the history of his reception—put the wrong people to death. In any case, it is precisely the combination of the killings associated with his name that has given it such a remarkable semantic stability over the long term.

The killings he is associated with have had exemplary repercussions. There is his alleged murder of his mother, Agrippina, the death of Seneca (and a few other prominent aristocrats), as well as the execution of Christians in Roman arenas. All three series of homicides have found distinctly negative echoes in a range of different textual genres and communicative contexts. In ancient Roman historiography, the greatest anathema is clearly reserved for his murder of aristocrats and the forced suicide of Seneca.⁴ Indeed, having a philosopher of some repute on his conscience almost certainly made him more of a tyrant than anything else. Yet the stigma of matricide in the same texts was thought to prove how perverse this emperor was—though not everyone displayed special regret over the death of Agrippina, whom both Tacitus and Suetonius render as a scheming,

² On the military policies of Augustus, see Dietmar Kienast, *Augustus. Prinzeps und Monarch*, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 332–79.

³ Suetonius, *Nero*, 18; Tacitus, *Annales*, 12, 50; cf. Karl Christ, *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit. Von Augustus bis zu Konstantin*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Beck, 1992), 235–36; Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 216–17, 221–24.

⁴ Tac. Ann. 15, 60, 2–65; 16, 17–18; 16, 21–25; Suet. Nero 35, 5–37, 2.

power-hungry criminal.⁵ Moreover, the killing of Christians hardly elicits negative sentiment in the pagan historiography of that time. For those victims had been designated (by Tacitus, for instance) as “enemies of the human race.” In the cases where their execution was condemned, it was only really when Nero was deemed to have pursued some aim or another that the ancient chroniclers did not approve of.⁶ Obviously, this chiefly negative horizon of reception shifted radically once Christianity had prevailed. From the standpoint of late antique texts, pagan senators—even a philosopher read and imitated as often as Seneca—were rather negligible figures when weighed against the martyrdom of Roman Christians or the execution of the apostles Peter and Paul. Furthermore, Nero has been assigned a more central role in salvation history since that era. As an early persecutor of Christians, he occupies an exceptional place in the history of martyrdom, one inextricably connected with the victory of the new faith. So it should come as no surprise that Nero has at times been associated with apocalyptic considerations. This oppressor of the Christians became part of the expectation of redemption, the Last Judgment. He was depicted as a transgressive ruler whose appearance signaled that the end of the world was near; at times he was portrayed as the Antichrist.⁷

Through the canonization of Christian literature between the third and fifth centuries CE, where such notions about Nero were inscribed, a specific image of Nero was passed down, one that could hardly ever be revised. It found its chief expression in influential narratives of cruelty and perversion. Yet if one wants to tell the story of tyranny effectively, one does not really need analytical texts. What is instead needed are narratives that generate credibility and emotional responses; these offer suggestive accounts and unusual surpluses of meaning.⁸ It makes sense that these stories about

⁵ Tac. Ann. 12, 59; 12, 66; 13, 1; Suet. Claud. 28, 2; 44.

⁶ Tac. Ann. 44, 3–5; Suet. Nero 16, 2.

⁷ Robert Konrad, “Kaiser Nero in der Vorstellung des Mittelalters,” in *Festiva Lanx. Studien zum mittelalterlichen Geistesleben*, ed. Karl Schnith (Munich: Verlag Salesianische Offizin, 1966), 2–12; Waltraud Jakob-Sonnabend, *Untersuchungen zum Nerobild der Spätantike* (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1990), 128–52.

⁸ On the production of narratives about tyrants, see Nino Luraghi, “Sterben wie ein Tyrann,” in *Tyrannis und Verführung*, ed. Martin Tremml and Wolfgang Pircher (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2000), 91–114.

Nero have a high degree of vivid detail, if not exactly fidelity to the available traditions. Here we recognize once again the fundamental ways in which the image of Nero has been negatively (over)determined. For hyperbolic inventions orchestrate the basic motive of moral transgression. They are so successful at doing this because people were always ready to assume the worst in the case of Nero. And the results of this memory work are rather curious. For instance: in *Moriz von Craün*, an epic poem of the early thirteenth century, Nero has his mother cut open in order to understand the physiology of the pregnancy he himself has longed for. It is a scene that was soon transmitted by illustrations on account of their graphic efficacy.⁹ To be sure, this example does not center on the matricide ascribed to Nero but instead the ruthlessness of a cold, matricidal tyrant. Such a compact negative representation was quite useful for projecting such Nero associations onto unpopular princes of the Middle Ages, such as Childeric, Henry IV, or Friedrich II—a repeated phenomenon of that epoch.¹⁰

The most influential of all these narratives admittedly—one that intended to finish off Nero morally highlighted another aspect of his capacity for transgression: that of the sovereign as artist. In this case, too, it is an image that remains deeply seared in popular memory: it is the Roman emperor Nero standing on the highest ramparts of his palace and costumed as a cithara player, singing of Troy's downfall with Rome burning in the background. This image coalesces two types in an intimate, albeit aberrant, way: the artist for whom everything, even reality, is merely spectacle *and* the despot pleased with the fire as a contingent aesthetic event, who has set the city ablaze in order to restore himself authorially. The despot-artist combination is precisely the opposite of the compassionate individual or responsible, dutiful ruler. It forms the basis for the plotline provided by Nero's biographer, Suetonius:

⁹ Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, *Krötenkuss und schwarzer Kater. Ketzerei, Götzendienst und Unzucht in der inquisitorischen Phantasie des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Warendorf: Fahlbusch, 1996), 118. The much-read *Kaiserchronik* of the twelfth century likewise contains Nero's "pregnancy" with the incident of the "frog birth" which provided the etymology for the Lateran in Rome (Hergemöller, *Krötenkuss und schwarzer Kater*, 117).

¹⁰ Gregor v. Tours (Hist. Lib. VI 46); cf. Konrad, "Kaiser Nero in der Vorstellung des Mittelalters," 9–12.

This terror raged for six days and seven nights, forcing the people to seek shelter in secluded tombs and at sites of cremation. A vast number of residential blocks were burned down, along with the homes of venerable generals, residences still adorned with spoils of war. Also destroyed were divine temples vowed and consecrated by the kings [of Rome] and later during the Punic and Gallic Wars. Everything else that had been deemed remarkable and worthy of preservation was reduced to ashes. The conflagration was observed by him [Nero] from a tower in the house of Maecenas, and, "being greatly delighted," as he said, "with the beauty of the flames," he intoned a song about the capture of Troy, wearing his tragic stage costume.¹¹

According to the canonical version: in order to round out the scope of this offense, Nero eventually sought to incriminate someone else for arson, once he himself was suspected of it. For rather than endanger his regime, he found a scapegoat in the Christians, whom he then had slaughtered most brutally to the acclaim of the pleasure-seeking masses in the arena.¹²

The essential elements of this master narrative have been affirmed through the ages, notwithstanding different emphases. After late antiquity, Nero's persecution of Christians moved increasingly from the periphery of history to its center. At the same time, the fascination with his aesthetic deeds and pitiable transgressive crimes did not diminish.¹³ The image of the unscrupulous prince singing over the destruction of his city retained a perverse, even charismatic, interest for many.

Accordingly, Nero's characterization as the artist-emperor continued to serve as a metaphor well into the twentieth century. It was ultimately popularized in both literature and the new medium of film (the form perhaps most capable of graphic realization). The greatest impact was produced by the 1896 novel *Quo Vadis* by Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz, who went on to win the Nobel Prize in 1905. This historicist monument of religious kitsch relates the conversion experience of a Roman aristocrat and officer when he is faced with Nero's tyranny and palace intrigues. The ensuing

¹¹ Suet. Nero 38.2.

¹² Tac. Ann. 15, 44, 4–6.

¹³ Konrad, "Kaiser Nero in der Vorstellung des Mittelalters," 7–8; incomprehensibly different is Jürgen Malitz, "Der Herrscher als Künstler," in *Mythen Europas. Schlüsselfiguren der Imagination. Bd. 1: Antike*, ed. Andreas Hartmann and Michael Neumann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), 145.

warning to the corrupted Roman *imperium*—that the Christian Church would soon be victorious—manifestly struck a nerve with European readers at the fin de siècle. Quickly translated into many languages, this highly dramatized account made it to the silver screen by 1901, and the 1912 adaptation became the first epic film in movie history.¹⁴ After World War II, it once again became relevant to portray resistance to tyrants who had what might be termed “transcendent expectations of redemption.” Then, in 1951, audiences were treated to the authoritative film version of Nero in the media age. That adaptation created an icon for the collective imagination: a brilliant portrayal by Peter Ustinov of the emperor playing his lyre and howling ridiculously.¹⁵

For centuries now, the image of Nero singing in the tower has served as a stable signifier for inhumane forms of self-actualization. This metastasizing expansion of meaning has in turn led to significant resonances, though some of them are quite jarring. A by no means isolated case is the memorable name for the burning software, *Nero Burning ROM*. Now, almost immediately after it was issued, the Nazi *Führer’s* proclamation of 19 March 1945 had already been labeled the “Nero Decree.” In it, Adolf Hitler had ordered the destruction of “all military facilities for transportation, communications, industry and utilities as well as material assets within the territory of the Reich which the enemy could in some way utilize either immediately or in the near future to continue its struggle.”¹⁶ This was evidently understood immediately by the German public as a Neronian act, although the decree had precious little to do with the 64 CE celebration of Rome’s disaster in song.

It is indicative for the visual power of this narrative that its sequence of events was more stable than its moral evaluation. For in a different norma-

¹⁴ On the history of the material and the film, Ralf Krebs, “Nero. Despot, Wahnsinniger oder Dämon? Die filmische Konstruktion einer ‘Bestie’ in *Quo Vadis*,” in *Pontes II. Antike im Film*, ed. Martin Korenjak and Karlheinz Töchterle (Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2002), 201.

¹⁵ On this issue, cf. *ibid.*; Thomas Paulsen, “‘Was für ein Künstler geht mit mir zugrunde!’ Peter Ustinovs Nero-Psychogramm und die antiken Quellen,” in *Antike und Mittelalter im Film. Konstruktion—Dokumentation—Projektion*, ed. Mischa Meier and Simona Slanicka (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007), 219–32.

¹⁶ For the *Führer’s* decree, cf. Heinrich Schwendemann, “‘Verbrannte Erde’? Hitlers ‘Nero-Befehl’ vom 19. März 1945,” in *Kriegsende in Deutschland*, ed. Ralph Giordano (Hamburg: Ellert & Richter Verlag, 2005), 158–67.

tive context, one might have derived other phenomena from it besides the well-known mainstream villain. Doing so only meant having to read ruthlessness and crime as an (artistic) imperative. The ultimate originator of this perspective was the Marquis de Sade, who extolled the unfailing deviancy of Nero as the artistry of abomination, thereby praising the true freedom and happiness that might emerge from the linkage of artistry and power. This motif becomes a programmatic one in his *Histoire de Juliette*, where he allows the anomic heroine Clairwil to declare: "Oh Nero, I will honor your memory. If you were still alive, I would worship you, and you would forever be my ideal and god." This example reveals the potential for nihilistic self-reflection that might also be expressed by the classic image of Nero. The figure of Nero could lead to a provocative revaluation of values, compellingly offering the fascination with the Dionysian as an alternative to a supposedly classic order. Byron eloquently commended the savagery of the circus as the emperor's "imperial pleasure," and Graf von Platen in his "Tower of Nero" associated the elemental power of fire, created in the divine image, with a titanic existence.¹⁷ Such an affirmation of decadence as a reference for genuine artistry cleared a pathway to a Nero who might serve as a high priest of the aesthetic. In this spirit Flaubert glorified the relationship between power and art in a number of his early works. In his *Memoires d'un fou*, he undeniably takes it to its most extreme. There he has the dead emperor appear as a performer of ecstatic images, when Satan announces a dance of death, with the emperor at the front: "Listen! The leader is Nero, the beloved son of my heart, the greatest poet there ever was on earth." A letter Flaubert wrote to Louis de Cornemin on 7 May 1844 reveals that such stagings are not merely effective phantasmagoria:

We should not mistake the bourgeois' boredom with Homer for deep meditation, for the intense, almost painful reverie of the poet who takes it to heart when he compares himself to the colossal ones and then has to admit defeat.... In this sense I admire Nero; he is the outstanding figure of the ancient world. Woe to all those who are not unsettled by Suetonius' account! I have recently read the "Life of Heliogabalus."... What is lovely in him is

¹⁷ On Nero's reception in the literature of "decadence," cf. Roger Bauer, *Die schöne Décadence. Geschichte eines literarischen Paradoxons* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2001), passim; 97–100, with evidence and a translation of De Sade (99).

quite different from Nero. In [the former], everything is Asian, feverish, romantic, unrestrained; it is the evening of the day, a frenzy in torchlight. By contrast, Nero is more calm, beautiful, ancient, serene; in short, he is the superior of the two.¹⁸

What is actually going on in this aestheticized reception of Nero is underscored by a passage that has never been used to make this point. It is perhaps the most controversial section in Ernst Jünger's *Strahlungen*, specifically the entry of 27 May 1944:

Alarms, flyovers. Looking out from the high roof of the "Raphael" [Hotel] in the direction of St. Germain, I twice saw squadrons flying by at high altitude while enormous clouds of smoke ascended. The river bridges are under attack. A fine mind must be at work, suggested by the type and sequencing of the measures taken to prevent reinforcements. The second time, at sunset, I held in my hand a glass of burgundy swimming with strawberries. The red towers and spires of the city were breathtakingly beautiful, like a calyx that had been strewn from above with a deadly fertilizer.¹⁹

The coldness of the despot is here the coldness of the observer perceiving the destruction of his surroundings (and his own endangerment therein) as primarily an aesthetic event. While he cannot influence that event, he can nonetheless appropriate it by having a specific attitude.²⁰ That attitude

¹⁸ On Flaubert and Nero, see Bauer, *Die schöne Décadence*, 103–4; see as well the evidence and translations of the passages cited.

¹⁹ Ernst Jünger, "Das zweite Pariser Tagebuch" in his *Strahlungen II* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), 270.

²⁰ Recently, this passage has been wholly detached from the events of the war and read as a complete metaphor (referring to Jünger's relationship to his Parisian lover) by Tobias Wimbauer (in his "Kelche sind Körper. Der Hintergrund der Erdbeeren in Burgunder-Szene," in *Anarch im Widerspruch—Neue Beiträge zu Werk und Leben der Gebrüder Jünger*, ed. Tobias Wimbauer [Schnellroda: Ed. Antaios, 2004], 23–70). His main argument for this claim is the lack of evidence for a second Allied air raid on Paris on the afternoon of 27 May. I am not convinced by this approach, particularly on the textual level because the passage about the "river bridges" and "fine mind" takes a back seat to the references to "calyx" and "fertilization" in the new interpretation. Apparently, those sentences do not fit quite so well into the network of metaphors that Wimbauer, starting from this passage, applies to *Strahlungen*.

is Neronian, and the common reactions to this passage document just how effectively the singer motif has been as a provocation.

If we review accordingly the reception of Nero over the centuries, we still have to confirm—in spite of some normative differences—just how inescapable the traditions surrounding Nero have been for the literary heritage of Europe. For even when Nero's image is transfigured as Dionysian, it is little more than the aestheticized flipside of the misanthropic artist-criminal. In this way, the image that has come down to us confirms the orthostasis of the traditional image, the one that clearly resists bourgeois bigotry. The love of decadence merely highlights other features while still accepting the stability of its actual basis. Either way, a Neronian gesture is activated by a self-description and identified by the audience as the solipsistic thoughtlessness of the individual toward everyone and everything else.

This orgy of acceptance through repetition minimizes to some extent just how monstrous the image is of a Roman emperor who rejoices in the downfall of his own capital city. In any event, it is monstrous enough to make us at least glance at the evidence for this narrative. It can be found in the histories penned by Tacitus and Cassius Dio as well as by Nero's biographer Suetonius.²¹ While Tacitus and Suetonius were contemporaries, Dio composed his history in the early third century CE. At first glance, the matter seems decided: all three are familiar with the singing emperor, and all three accuse him of arson. Yet if one looks more closely, one finds cracks in the picture. In fact, none of them agree on the actual location of Nero's serenade. Dio designates the highest point of the palace (or the Palatine) as the scene of the crime whereas Suetonius identifies it as the Tower of Maecenas (on the Esquiline Hill). So, just a few decades after the fact, there was still no canonical version of this most potent transgression by the emperor. Tacitus confirms this judgment in a vivid account. The fact, however, that he misses a chance to stylize the song in the tower into the emperor's original sin is unexpected. For Tacitus approved neither of Nero nor the Roman Empire. On the contrary: he relates Nero's attempts to extinguish the fire and to alleviate the suffering of the homeless through opening up his gardens and reducing the price of grain to a bare minimum. Then Tacitus

²¹ Tac. Ann. 15, 38–40; Suet. Nero 38, 1; Dio 62, 16.

concludes the passage, “[a]s popular as these measures were, they had no effect. For, just as the city was burning, the rumor was spread that [Nero] had entered his private theater to sing of the fall of Troy, likening that ancient catastrophe with the current situation of Rome.”²²

Not only is Tacitus introducing here a third setting for Nero’s offending song. Rather, his formulation invariably suggests as well that the entire thing was merely a rumor. Just who spread it around remains unclear. However, negative rumors can be quite significant: they uncover political nonaffirmation in a system that has removed the sovereign, at least in part, from public scrutiny.²³ From this perspective, Nero’s rejoicing in catastrophe is especially *bien trouvé*—just like the stories a few decades earlier about the sexual perversions that Emperor Tiberius had allegedly pursued on Capri.²⁴ Even if we accept that it is a fiction, the narrative reveals something striking: namely, that Nero identified intensely as an artist. Otherwise, the calculated delegitimization of the story might not have taken his artistry as its starting point of departure.

I. TRIUMPH AND MANIPULATION

Nero celebrated his greatest moment as an artist early in 68 CE. Having been absent from the capital for nearly one and a half years in the Greek East, his return to Rome was a virtual epiphany. Bearing diverse forms of tribute, his movement through the city made provocative reference to the victory festivals familiar throughout the empire. The problematical staging of these processions is described emphatically by Suetonius:

On his return from Greece, he went first to Naples where he had first exhibited his artistry. There he entered the city with white horses through a specially designed breach in the city walls, as is the custom of victors in the sacred games. He did the same when entering Antium, then Albanum, and finally

²² Tac. Ann. 15, 39, 3.

²³ On rumors as a weapon, cf. Egon Flaig, “Wie Kaiser Nero die Akzeptanz bei der Plebs urbana verlor. Eine Fallstudie zum politischen Gerücht im Prinzipat,” *Historia* 52 (2003): 358–63.

²⁴ Suet. Tib. 43–44.

Rome. Yet in Rome he rode in the same chariot used by Augustus in his triumphal processions, and he wore a purple robe and a Greek cloak adorned with golden stars, bearing on his head the Olympic crown and in his right hand the Pythian one. At the same time, the rest [of the victory wreaths] were carried before him with inscriptions telling where he had won them and against whom, as well as the titles of the songs and plays [he performed]. His chariot was followed by his claque as if it were a small victory procession. They continuously shouted that they were the attendants of Augustus and the soldiers of this *triumph*. Then, through an archway opened up out of the Circus Maximus, he made his way across the Velabrum and the Forum to the Palatine and the Temple of Apollo. All along the route, animals were sacrificed in his honor, and the streets were repeatedly sprinkled with saffron water while birds, colorful ribbons, and sweets were showered upon him. He had these crowns placed in his private chambers around the beds and had statues made portraying him in the guise of a lyre-player; he had also had coins struck with that same image.²⁵

Now the official *triumphus* (or triumphal procession) in Rome was by no means as hieratic as one might expect of a state ritual that had been around for centuries.²⁶ It certainly did not lack scenic idiosyncrasies inasmuch as performances by significant individuals at times bordered on the ridiculous.²⁷ Nor was Nero the first *triumphator* who rode into the capital clothed in a habit that deviated from strict traditional observance. For instance, there was Pompey who, instead of triumphing in the conventional attire as Jupiter with a crimson mantle, threw on a star-embroidered mantle that had been seized from Alexander the Great.²⁸ This may well have been the allusion that Nero was making through his own mise-

²⁵ Suet. Nero 25, 1–2.

²⁶ On the range of productions, cf. the list compiled by Tanja Itgenshorst, *Tota illa pompa. Der Triumph in der römischen Republik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

²⁷ In this sense, Pompey's attempt achieved (a problematic) renown: on the occasion of his first *triumph*, he had the chariots pulled by elephants instead of horses. Yet when they were unable to pass through one of the gates on the way to the Capitol, the victor had to go back to using traditional draft animals (cf. Mary Beard, *Roman Triumph* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007], 17).

²⁸ Cf. Alfred Heuß, "Alexander der Große und die politische Ideologie des Abendlandes," *Antike und Abendland* 4 (1954): 69, 81–82; Beard, *Roman Triumph*, 13–14.

en-scène.²⁹ However—and here the emperor was in fact a trailblazer—any procession of this kind had to be linked with military matters. Instead, it was a strong programmatic move indeed to base a ceremony on winning music competitions, when such rites had actually been intended to exalt an individual for subjugating foreign peoples or saving the Roman nation from aggression. By the same token, its resonances with the *triumphus* had to be so exact that precise calculations were required. This notion is supported by the individual accomplishments recorded on tablets as well as the religious exultation of the victor by the populace of Rome. Nero's provocation was hardly neutralized by the circumstance that the terminus of his procession was the Temple of Apollo, not the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol. That only made it clearer how seriously Nero took stage management: such artistic victories were dedicated to the god responsible for them, just as military victories had been consecrated to the highest state (and expansionary) god in the traditional *triumphi*. Put simply: in 68 CE, Nero significantly revised the semantics of this ritual, the most visually powerful one of Rome.

Yet none of this came out of nowhere. For Nero's scandalous entry into the capital had been preceded by his equally unprecedented journey to the Eastern Empire, specifically to Greece. That trip had been prepared in advance and planned with military precision. And it could not have been done differently. Not only was the emperor traveling in an entourage of several thousand functionaries,³⁰ but the primary purpose of the journey was basically to surpass all past successes so that it would be completely impossible—statistically or otherwise—to compare him to any other victor. Nero's performance was supposed to exceed all other triumphs as well as to extinguish any memory of them. To achieve this end, he saw to it

²⁹ As already suggested in Heuß, "Alexander der Große und die politische Ideologie des Abendlandes," 86.

³⁰ On Nero's tour of Greece, cf. Keith R. Bradley, "The Chronology of Nero's Visit to Greece in AD 66/67," *Latomus* 37 (1978): 61–72; Helmut Halfmann, *Itinera Principum. Geschichte und Typologie der Kaiserreisen im Römischen Reich* (Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag, 1986), 173 (on the travel route); Nigel M. Kennell, "ΝΕΡΩΝ ΠΕΡΙΟΔΟΝΙΚΗΣ," *American Journal of Philology* 109 (1988): 239–51 (on the victor titles); Susan E. Alcock, "Nero at Play? The Emperor's Grecian Odyssey," in *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History & Representation*, ed. Jás Elsner and Jamie Masters (London: Duckworth, 1994), 98–111; Mischa Meier, "'Qualis artifex pereo'—Neros letzte Reise," *HZ* 286 (2008): 561–64, 594–95.

that the four major competitions in the Greek world took place that same year, though each had previously been held every four years and usually at different times of year.³¹ That way, in a single visit to Greece, the young emperor was able to take part in competitions in Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and on the Isthmus of Corinth. After that, as icing on the cake, there were the Panathenaic Games in Athens in addition to dozens of smaller festivals that were fine-tuned to correspond with his itinerary. In any case, the total effect of Nero's participation in so many events was multiplied by his participation in a wide range of disciplines. Consequently, Nero appeared not only as a singer and citharede but also as an actor, herald, and (last but not least) a charioteer. It is significant that he embellished the results by imposing a musical competition onto the traditional, purely athletic *agons* of Olympia. The success of his concerted efforts led to inflated results. He thus returned from Greece with 1,808 prizes.³² And on the occasion of his return to Rome, this outcome presumably was accompanied by the same fetishism for figures that would have been customary for a standard *triumphator* of the Republic, announcing the numbers of those killed, prisoners taken and cities conquered. The fact that Nero's cultural tour was fully premeditated to stress his secular pre-eminence was further illustrated by the fact that, as the new victor, he had the statues of previous winners dragged off with hooks and thrown into privies. And Nero's performances were exceptional in another respect: after he was acknowledged by the panel of judges, he would more or less declare himself the winner, thus behaving to some extent as his own herald.³³ With that, the visibility of his triumph became almost entirely autonomous of other authorities. Essentially, his surroundings were exploited by him as a stage on which his epoch-making genius would be able to resonate.

Such artistic self-expansion was certainly anything but unproblematic, both in its construction and in its reception by contemporaries. For a traditional Roman, particularly a member of the ruling class, any emperor who performed in public—especially in the Greek East—was anathema. For here was a man celebrating his victories in song, composition, poetry and

³¹ Suet. Nero 22, 3–23, 1.

³² Meier, “Qualis artifex pereo,” 597.

³³ Suet. Nero 24, 1.

lyre playing from the chariot of Augustus. In addition, he was engaging in competition with persons whom the social discourse of the capital regarded as belonging to the class of domestics—no matter how much one might esteem them as specialists in entertainment.³⁴ But even in Greece, where one's self-expression as an artist was not as problematic, the performances of this emperor-artist must have been experienced with at least some ambivalence. In principle, of course, it was tremendously flattering that the most powerful man in the (Roman) universe sympathized demonstratively with the cultural achievements of the conquered, sharing their norms not so much paternalistically as emphatically, in the manner of an accomplice. Nonetheless, when observed from a different vantage point, the collateral damage from the emperor's cultural excursion was far-reaching. Any well-intentioned spectator was being asked to accept that centuries-old sacred traditions, such as the festival calendar, were now to be superseded by imperial edicts, or that competitive heroes of yesteryear were to have their statues cleared away. Even more problematic was the unhealthy relationship between power and art that could be discerned in Nero's commitment to song. The Greek competitions were highly specialized events, unrivaled in their prestige and based on professionalism and competition. The fact that *agon*—the term applied to them—signifies any form of struggle, including existential conflict, underlines the significance of the cultural competition as a duel. How might a singing emperor be integrated into this cultural paradigm and, as Suetonius avowed, especially one who offered those around him either friendship or enmity, “depending on the extent to which he was acclaimed”? How were cities to deal with a ruler who demanded the return of everything he had ever given them if they were to forfeit his favor?³⁵ Everywhere people talked about how missteps of this kind could end careers (at least temporarily). The future emperor Vespasian, for example, is said to have been removed from Nero's closest entourage after he had

³⁴ On the social place of actors in the Republic and in the imperial period, cf. Hartmut Leppin, *Histrionen. Untersuchungen zur sozialen Stellung von Bühnenkünstlern im Westen des Römischen Reiches zur Zeit der Republik und des Principats* (Bonn: Habelt, 1992); Catherine Edwards, “Beware of Imitations: Theatre and the Subversion of Imperial Identity,” in *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History & Representation*, ed. Jás Elsner and Jamie Masters (London: Duckworth, 1994), 83–86.

³⁵ Suet. Nero 25, 3; 32, 3.

fallen asleep at one of the emperor's performances.³⁶ How, then, could such sensitivities of a man in power be integrated with the sacred notion of *agon*? In reality, it was impossible to do so. For, as expected, people did what evidently had to be done. They let the emperor win wherever he appeared—regardless of whether he was really the best. Such practices had indeed been observed before Nero's expedition to Greece. More than a few cities chose to butter up the emperor by sending garlands and crowns to Rome on the occasion of important (or less important) festivals, and Nero also always accepted them with pleasure.³⁷ Awards—and manipulations of *agonism*—were in this form largely painless affairs, for no one was being forced to lose or make discernibly serious sacrifices. To some extent, it was a ritual act to bestow an honor on the emperor, comparable to the veneration of a distant power by means of formal worship. In the process, the sovereign was simply being afforded something of social benefit which was consistent with the structural imbalance between center and periphery and which summoned up an association that transcended spatial limitations, without driving up the expenses for one's own cultural habitat. Yet things were different when an omnipotent ruler could be seen in direct competition with other individuals. In that case, the judges had to make their decisions before the eyes of thousands. Certainly, no one expected that their predetermined votes might be openly disapproved of by the audience. People were simply too realistic when it came to the desires of the powerful. However, they might be less realistic in private. In addition: in a culture that was oversensitive to accusations of fraud, judges who acted contrary to appearances would inevitably sacrifice their reputations—despite any understanding due them for their predicament. The collateral damage could be severe, meaning that these judges would thus be regarded as compromised, since lack of freedom was generally considered something alien to the artistic enterprise. This arrangement of factors could become especially dramatic if the deception could no longer be concealed. When Nero once dropped his scepter in the middle of a tragic performance, he actually should have been disqualified if the rule were adhered to. Yet, amid the frenetic applause of the audience, no one seemed to have noticed the mishap, and the problem

³⁶ Suet. Vesp. 4, 4.

³⁷ Suet. Nero 22, 3.

was anyway soon resolved by one of the emperor's resourceful paladins. But no eloquent distortion of what happened could help when Nero was thrown from his chariot in Olympia while—hyperbolically enough—driving a ten-horse team. That he was crowned as the winner after this race underscores the ambiguity of *agon* whenever an emperor was involved.³⁸ The same was true of his conduct. At first glance, when he imitated sportsmen in his self-presentation, it may have appeared to integrate athletics and aesthetics. Suetonius thus reports that Nero always displayed trepidation and anxiety before a competition, encountering opponents with wariness and judges with reverence. “As if his rivals were of the same station as himself, he used to observe them, trying to gain their favor, while also slandering them behind their backs; he sometimes assailed them with abuse when meeting them, and even bribed those who were especially proficient.”³⁹

But at second glance, whether as athlete or artist, the emperor likely encouraged more distance than familiarity. Even if he were essentially calling up the classical topoi of athletic conduct, the interaction was not a genuine one but only a self-deconstructing citation. For those who lost against him were unable to pay him back in kind. As a result, the aura of violence (made tangible by the thousands of soldiers who accompanied an emperor on his travels) put an ugly face on what might have been something natural. In structural terms, this goes to show that the linkage of power and art almost inevitably produces negative interferences. And when that linkage succeeds, it involves a huge communicative risk. To the extent that the freedom of aesthetic judgments is suspended in the encounter with power, the aesthetic works of despots cannot be described independently. Instead, they follow the laws of political expediency or allow only political evaluations of a performance. If the ruler is viewed positively *qua* ruler, then mitigating circumstances apply to his artistic or intellectual appearances. Among the Roman emperors, Marcus Aurelius is an outstanding example of one who has garnered high praise for incredibly mediocre intellectual products.⁴⁰ In contrast, if the regime of an em-

³⁸ Suet. Nero 24, 1–2.

³⁹ Suet. Nero 23, 2.

⁴⁰ On this issue, see the very succinct account by Anthony R. Birley, *Mark Aurel. Kaiser und Philosoph*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Beck, 1977), 380–400; Jörg Fündling, *Marc Aurel* (Darmstadt: Primus-Verlag, 2008), 45–51, 115–29. The list could easily be expanded.

peror appears deficient, cruel, and evil in every respect, then his conduct in another realm can only be unworthy of discussion. Or to put it the other way around: where displeasure with an emperor runs rampant, defamation of his art will soon follow. Indeed, that art becomes the privileged target of ridicule by contemporaries and future generations. The singing of an unscrupulous emperor essentially frees up narratives of the ridiculous; the unreasonable intervention of power in the realm of art elicits a discursive revenge that has no mercy. And this is exactly what we see when we take stock of ancient traditions concerning the emperor-artist Nero. People indulge in quite a bit of detail about the absurdity of an artistic emperor, as in the following passage by Suetonius: "While he [Nero] was singing, no one was allowed to leave the theatre even for the most urgent reasons. And so it is said that some women gave birth during the performances and many a man, tired of listening and applauding, secretly leaped from the wall or feigned death in order to be carried out (as if for burial)."⁴¹

The physical act of laughing at someone has a powerful potential to delegitimize, one that extends into our current age. For to allege that the emperor had virtually terrorized his subjects with bad art is not something that can be verified empirically by posterity: we do not possess any significant fragments of his poetic output.

It would thus appear that art and power, at least in the Roman Empire, could not be conjoined without performative contradictions. So, isn't Mischa Meier right when he recently concludes in a lengthy essay that Nero's artistry is impossible to explain socially or politically but must (as claimed by ancient writers) be explained by his *will*—i.e., by his desire to be an artist? As emperor, Meier argues, Nero was able to fulfill his dream by simulating that he was (in some sense) *not* the emperor despite his omnipotence.⁴² As seductive as this psychological *deus ex machina* may be, I cannot go along with his view. Yet, before we get to alternative interpretations of the context in which Nero staged his singing, it may be useful to take a closer look at the emperor's self-expansion as an artist.

⁴¹ Suet. Nero 23, 2.

⁴² Meier, "Qualis artifex pereo," 588–91.

2. EDUCATION AND PERFORMANCE

To begin with, the notion that a Roman aristocrat, heir to the throne, or even the emperor would occupy himself with the fine or performing arts was by no means strange or even offensive in the first century CE. And this principle was already operative in the late Republic,⁴³ even if what was regarded as overly aesthetic was at times denounced and ridiculed publicly in the second and first centuries BCE. Still, the fact that one could be taunted in public for this is equally important; to my mind, it provides the matrix for the problem of Nero. Because the ambivalence of admiration and denunciation reflects a historical compromise over those formulas that befitted one's social status, a compromise that the Roman elite had laboriously negotiated on its own. A centerpiece of this social compact was the two-faced attitude toward Greece and Greek culture. That attitude likewise served as a preordained point of reference for all aesthetic activities in Rome. This Roman incoherence toward Hellas, however, was not just some issue of individual or group taste. More accurately, it operated between realms that were strictly divorced from each other, between which (at least) the members of the Republican elite sometimes operated on a daily basis. In *otium*, the state of being absent from Rome, an artificial environment was constructed, in which almost everything was imported from Hellas, and a great deal of time and money were spent on making acquisitions *à la mode grecque*; in the city of Rome, with its hierarchically mixed public sphere, actions and statements were avoided that could be interpreted as those of an *art connoisseur*; instead, one imitated the old Romans who were mostly clueless about Hellenic culture. The relationship to Greek poetry and performance was just a single indicator of this grotesque opposition, albeit a highly conspicuous one. Similar things could be said for engaging with the arts, science, and philosophy. In short: the Roman elite of the late Republic moved and communicated in two worlds at the same time.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Champlin, *Nero*, 64–67; Meier, “Qualis artifex pereo,” 579–80.

⁴⁴ On the Janus-faced reception of Greece in Rome, see Ulrich Gotter, *Griechenland in Rom? Die römische Rede über Hellas und ihre Kontexte (3.–1. Jhdt. v. Chr.)*, unpublished habilitation, Freiburg 2001, esp. chapters 6 and 7.

This division between the normative and aesthetic worlds became noticeably less dramatic after the early imperial period, most likely because it could no longer be instrumentalized as easily as it had been in the politics of the Republic. Moreover, because the political system was becoming more strongly aligned with the emperor than the Roman Senate or the public sphere of the city, the demonstrative attitude of upper-class families toward an elaborated Greek culture lost its power to be controversial. The normative foundations of the discourse on Greece were still a factor, though, and remained deeply sedimented in the self-perception of Roman elites. An engagement with culture was still understood to be an identifier of decadence; *belles lettres* and artistic performance were still branded as inadequate in relation to the military–political complex; the difference in status between performers and spectators continued to be experienced as radical and irreversible. These fundamental distinctions that had been inculcated repeatedly since Augustus were so essential that a performer, however popular he might have been, had only a reduced status under the law when compared with the most ordinary citizen. And imperial status groups were at least threatened with the loss of status if they performed in the arena, the circus, or the theater.⁴⁵

Against this backdrop, the cultural context becomes clearer in which Nero acted as an artist. Composing songs and playing the cithara belonged apparently to the standard repertoire of aristocratic socialization. Yet it was not prescribed how much one should do these things later in one's life. Those who composed verses included not only Cicero and Caesar but also Augustus and Tiberius.⁴⁶ And the lyre was the fashionable instrument of the entire century. To members of the political elite, the ability to play it was (at best) considered something commendable and (at worst) as something neither harmful nor strange.⁴⁷ By contrast, performances by notables in public occurred far less frequently. Not unexpectedly, in the early imperial period there were repeated cases—contrary to Roman law—in which the sons of senators or equestrians were involved particularly in the theater

⁴⁵ Suet. Aug. 43, 3.

⁴⁶ Suet. Caes. 56, 7; Suet. Aug. 85, 2; Suet. Tib. 70, 2.

⁴⁷ Hartmut Leppin, "Die *Laus Pisonis* als Zeugnis senatorischer Mentalität," *Klio* 74 (1992): 225–26.

and the arena. And the fact that the corresponding legal prohibitions had to be reiterated could indeed be interpreted as a reaction to such temptations. Yet, on the other hand, these were undoubtedly phenomena that were statistically marginal. And this is certainly not to say that young (or no longer so young) members of the elite would never have had anything at all to do with poetic or artistic activities. No doubt, there were corresponding circles in which persons of status would also have “performed.” Yet such public appearances—in the normatively relevant sense—would mean public displays of one’s own abilities before a socially mixed audience that was sensitive to hierarchy; it did not mean presenting oneself within a group of more or less (social) equals.

Since the late 40s of the first century CE performances such as Nero’s fluctuated between these two poles of explicit education in the arts and public practice of them. According to Suetonius, Nero had already come into contact with almost all the free arts as a boy, including music. Poetry was apparently something that came easily to him. He “wrote poems fluently, without effort, and did not, as some think, pass off others’ as his own,” avers Suetonius. He continues: “I have gotten hold of writing tablets and notebooks and papers with some well-known verses of his, written with his own hand, so that it is perfectly evident that they were not copied or taken down from dictation, but worked out clearly by a person who writes while thinking and creating, so many instances were there of words erased or crossed out or written over. He likewise had an above-average talent for painting and sculpture.”⁴⁸ The responses of audiences substantiate Suetonius’ judgment. Nero’s verses survived his violent end by a considerable period of time: they were not merely recited immediately after his death in provocatively positive commemorations but were also referenced in late antiquity.⁴⁹ What appears to have been more elemental than his inclination for poetry or song was his passion for chariot racing in his youth: A number of the stories from that period, in which we know little about him, make reference to the Roman circuses.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Suet. Nero 52; on Nero’s literary output with all the sources cited, see Christoph Schubert, *Studien zum Nerobild in der lateinischen Dichtung der Antike* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998), 96–100.

⁴⁹ Champlin, *Nero*, 83–84.

⁵⁰ Suet. Nero 22, 1–2.

His image as an artist and musician became more clear-cut—and more provocative—when he acceded to the throne. In an eminently programmatic turn, Nero recruited for his court one of the most-respected cithara virtuosos, the Greek Terpnus, making him his own teacher. Suetonius maintains that Nero sat many days with him and listened, but then also studied so zealously that one can speak of serious professionalization.⁵¹ Nonetheless, when one speaks of Nero's love for art and song, one should not forget that he apparently loved not only singing, declamation, and poetry but also (above all else), "performing." It is said that he liked to repeat to friends the Greek proverb: "For hidden music there is no respect."⁵² So there's the rub. As a consequence, the emperor experimented with a variety of hierarchically mixed publics, which at first were nearly improvised, as when he sang in 59 CE at the Juvenalia in Rome before a select audience. In 64 CE, his moment had arrived: In a still Hellenistically inclined Naples, he made his public debut as a performer, placing himself as artist-sovereign in the limelight, with great aplomb and with no constraints. However, this was still not Rome but more a protected space of cultural difference, shielded from the dominant culture of Italy. And in the same year, he introduced himself as a charioteer to the broader public in Rome. By this point, Nero had almost certainly determined that he was prepared to go the distance as an artist. As early as 60 CE, he had inaugurated in Rome a magnificent Greek-oriented festival, the Neronia, which became so favored by the public that it was repeated in 65 CE. In the process, he could now be seen everywhere in the capital city—as a singer, cithara player, and tragedian. In the autumn of 66, he finally commences his tour of Greece that culminated pleasingly with the triumphal processions in Rome.⁵³

If we take a bird's-eye view of Nero's record as an artist, it cannot be categorized on the whole as excessive. Thus, the fact that at a relatively young age he dedicated himself to the arts does not distinguish him plainly from a number of his aristocratic peers. Yet what is principally more astonishing is the disciplinary breadth that he aspired to. The centerpiece

⁵¹ Suet. Nero 20, 1–2; 25, 3.

⁵² Suet. Nero 20, 1.

⁵³ On Nero's development as an artist, see the very helpful outline provided by Champlin, *Nero*, 53–77.

of his performances were the most basic skills, playing the cithara and composing songs, but that was then followed by playing tragic roles and by pantomime (a type of expressive dance) in his final years.⁵⁴ At the same time, this combination of cithara, song, poetry, and tragedy may still seem halfway natural, and the extension of it to pantomime at least logical. However, I know of no other artist at a relatively advanced level of professionalization who also competed in chariot races. In this regard, Nero was a singular phenomenon in the performance world of the early imperial period, and if one evokes the sovereign's drive for artistic self-realization, this anomaly should not be obscured. Nonetheless, the theatrical stage and racetrack go well together in one crucial respect: in their stage effectiveness and in their power to mobilize—and inspire—an audience through charismatic performances.

3. SINGER AND SOVEREIGN

Whoever performs wants to have an impact. But what effect would or could be achieved by a sovereign performing as a singer and charioteer? Mischa Meier has answered this question by supporting the hypothesis of intentionality. That Nero intended to do such things was assumed by ancient sources and is even repeated in his own remarks that as emperor he became an artist because he had always *wanted* to be one.⁵⁵ Now, resorting to the emotional lives of historical figures is only methodologically permissible if it is tested according to the sourcing requirements of premodernity. What is more, a crosscheck has to be conducted to show that there is no other significant competing logic for those figures' actions. In this spirit, then, Meier's psychological interpretation can be seen as the result of an aporetic experiment: he is reviewing the various options that have been proposed by researchers for giving Nero's public productions a social meaning. Yet unlike Rolf Rilinger's essay on Seneca and Nero,⁵⁶ Meier

⁵⁴ On the specific disciplines involved, cf. *ibid.*, 77–83.

⁵⁵ Christ also concurs in his *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit*, 229–30; Schubert, *Studien zum Nerobild in der lateinischen Dichtung der Antike*, 96.

⁵⁶ Rolf Rilinger, "Seneca und Nero. Konzepte zur Legitimation kaiserlicher Herrschaft," *Klio* 78 (1996): 130–57.

comes to the sobering conclusion that these kinds of attempts at interpretation are not convincing. For singing did not function to legitimize the ruler, either in the microcosm of Rome or the macrocosm of the empire. And because it was suspicious in light of the traditional norms of the state, any power-based investment in the artistic sector would have been proscribed.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, it is clearly necessary to take another look at the matter. It is indeed Meier's merit to have summarized again the communicative problems that a singing sovereign must have caused in Rome. But, in my view, his argument is based on an understated assessment of Nero's room for maneuver. Meier assumes that the young ruler could freely choose the fields of his self-representation. Such an assumption is, I believe, mistaken. To understand what Nero's artistic self-expansion meant requires examining the options available to Nero when his legal (adoptive) father Claudius died. The question of his room for maneuver, though, is closely connected with the paradoxical political system that we usually label—in a glorious reduction of its complexity—as “monarchy” or “empire.”

The specific form of Roman autocracy that Nero was supposed to fill at the age of seventeen had been negotiated with the senatorial aristocracy by Augustus, who then stage-managed it for a custom fit. At its semantic core, it consisted in the explicit denial that the new regime was even a monarchy. In fact, it was and is difficult to assign an accurate name to the Augustan state. Augustus himself insisted on calling it a *res publica* (public matter) that he was responsible for restoring and where he himself was merely the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) on account of his services on behalf of the state.⁵⁸ Officially and constitutionally, then, Rome continued to be called *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (the Senate and People of Rome)—as if nothing had changed. At the same time, there could be no doubt that the will of one man eclipsed that of any other institution. Informed contemporaries, for the most part, similarly deemed Rome to have become an autocracy. This structural ambiguity in the political system was the result of a historic compromise: At the beginning of 27 BC, two memorable scenes transpired in the Roman Senate. On 13 January, the civil war general C.

⁵⁷ Meier, “Qualis artifex pereo,” 573–78.

⁵⁸ Aug. res gest. 34.

Julius Caesar, known as *Octavian*, solemnly abdicated all extraordinary powers granted him during those wars, dismissing the Roman state from his sphere of power (as he himself later wrote), and committing it again to the free disposition of the Senate and the Roman people. Two or three days later, he was happy to “defer to” the requests of senators on all sides; they prevailed on him to accept the role of provider and guardian of the *res publica*. In actuality, this meant that he was transferring to himself authority over of a number of important provinces—mostly at the boundaries of the empire—for a period of ten years. Since almost all the imperial troops were stationed in those provinces, it also meant that Octavian was now taking on de facto supreme command of the Roman army. Plus: for having formally relinquished his power in this way, he was honored with the new name of *Augustus*, “the venerable one,” and thereby elevated far above the level of his fellow aristocrats.⁵⁹

This Augustan formulation of order remained intact as an ideology, even after his death. Yet, following this first *princeps* (first citizen), Roman autocracy still oscillated between two poles. On the one hand, it became increasingly clear that the death of a ruler would not open up a path back to the traditional *res publica*. Even those with deep resentments toward the regime found themselves increasingly having to acknowledge that there was no alternative to autocracy.⁶⁰ On the other hand, aggravation was obviously the order of the day, and no one who ruled after Augustus was able to get reasonably good press *post mortem*. We hear instead of crimes, perversions, and all the blood-stained gossip that ancient authors furnished on the stifling atmosphere surrounding the ruling dynasty.⁶¹ And it was certainly not just a discursive phenomenon occurring within a deprived class. Such a narrative of evil finds itself realized in trials for *lèse-majesté* and in executions of senators, as well as the murders of relatives, conspiracies, bitter infighting and outright violence in the streets. What is more, the personal record of the rulers is anything but overwhelming.

⁵⁹ Cf. Kienast, *Augustus*, 82–93; Helmut Castritius, *Der römische Prinzipat als Republik* (Husum: Matthiesen, 1982), has nonetheless taken the discursive surface for reality.

⁶⁰ Tac. Ann. 1, 1–4.

⁶¹ On the function of sexual deviance in describing politics, cf. Eckhart Meyer-Zwifelhofer, *Im Zeichen des Phallus. Die Ordnung des Geschlechtslebens im antiken Rom* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 1995).

Only Claudius was ritually apotheosized (among the state gods) after he died—even if it is possible that he had been murdered prior to that. Caligula was carved into pieces in a dark arcade, and many wished to dispose of Tiberius' corpse—a death by natural causes—in the Tiber River.⁶² The reason for these annoyances seems to me to have been the demands placed on the sovereign, demands that were unsettlingly complex for everyone involved. On balance, the choreography of Augustus demanded of all partners a precise knowledge of their roles and an extremely high level of discipline in playing those roles. If one looks for the predetermined stress points, they can be named on both sides—stress points that could quickly turn the stage at times into an uncontrollable slaughterhouse.

In theory, the *princeps* and his elite had the same main problem. Like them, he moved simultaneously amid two different and mutually incompatible systems of norms. The aristocrats had to align their behavior with the reality of the monarchy even while the norms and public discourse remained those of the Republic. For the *princeps*, it was in turn necessary to show restraint as the *primus inter pares* while having a simultaneous awareness of his absolute power, against which there were no effective institutional barriers other than personal ethics or (evidently) political expediency.⁶³ This basic communicative problem was dramatically exacerbated by Augustus' claim—declared as the basis of the new order—that he had achieved priority in the state only by means of his accomplishments.⁶⁴ For such shoes were far too big for the next emperor to fill. Only his immediate successor, Tiberius, was able to claim that he conducted himself in a manner that was acceptable by Augustan standards. The rest of them when they came to power were really nobodies in terms of the meritocratic idea. At their best, they were blank slates: Caligula, thus, was

⁶² Suet. Tib. 75, 1.

⁶³ Cf. Ulrich Gotter, "Die Nemesis des Allgemein-Gültigen. Max Webers Charisma-Begriff und die antiken Monarchien," in *Das Charisma. Funktionen und symbolische Repräsentationen*, ed. Pavlína Rychterova and Stefan Seit (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 178–80. Egon Flaig has rightly rejected the legal-state paradigm for analyzing Roman autocracy in favor of a sociological one ("acceptance by the most important social groups"); Egon Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 1992), esp. 174–207.

⁶⁴ See thus Rilinger, "Seneca und Nero," 132.

a very young man with no political capital. Claudius may have been the right age, yet until then he had been regarded by the entire family as unsuitable for any public career owing to his disability.⁶⁵ Under such circumstance, it was not easy to do what was demanded of a ruler by the system, namely the ability to demonstrate an independent image in order to mark their own supremacy as something natural. In seeking a role that might legitimize their sovereignty, they were almost exclusively thrown back on the factuality of their own power. Under these circumstances, then, it was twice as difficult for the young emperor to maintain the stage management of consensus that Augustus had normalized. The public order would quite rapidly prove to be fragile if the aristocracy were to no longer play along—for example, by casting doubt on the quality of the *princeps*—or if the monarch were to distance himself from the self-restraint demanded by the constitution—thereby demonstrating his questionable superiority by force. The consequences were fear, conspiracies against the emperor, preemptive executions of senators, and all-around threatening signals. As Tiberius had formulated it shrewdly when he first came to power: ruling imperial Rome was like trying to hold a wolf by the ears.⁶⁶

So, the prospects were not at all good for the new regime, when in 54 CE Nero was required to slip into the role of Augustus. That the prospects were even worse in his case than for other young princes is related to a number of very specific factors. Generally speaking, Nero was far less autonomous at the start of his reign than any other *princeps* before him. The pivotal factor was not only his age, although it was more than a marginal one. More specifically, there was no precedent in the short history of the Roman Empire for transferring sovereign power to a seventeen-year-old. Even Caligula was already twenty-five when his adoptive father died. It was incontestable that Claudius had set up *his* adopted son as his successor.⁶⁷ But Nero unquestionably lacked an independent profile, let alone autonomous merits. And of (at least) equal import was the fact that the line of succession was not unambiguous. For alongside of Nero,

⁶⁵ Suet. Claud. 3, 2; 4, 7.

⁶⁶ Suet. Tib. 25, 1.

⁶⁷ Cf. Gerhard Waldherr, *Nero. Eine Biographie* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2005), 47–48.

whom Agrippina had brought into their marriage, Claudius had another son from his first marriage. This biological child was—of all names—given the programmatic one of *Britannicus*, thus recalling the old emperor's most important triumph. Yet, since adopted sons were treated as biological children under Roman inheritance law, neither of Claudius' sons could have made a claim to have primacy. For in principle, they were on equal footing as heirs to wealth and political power. Nero nevertheless won this competition without a worry. On the one hand, he was already three years older than his stepbrother; on the other, he was favored by the main power brokers in Rome after the death of Claudius, i.e., Agrippina (Nero's mother), Seneca (Nero's tutor), and Burrus (the praetorian prefect). To have Burrus on board meant having access to the only available military unit in Italy at legion strength. Everyone knew this meant that all resistance was futile. And so, Nero's investiture as the sole ruler (while Britannicus was simultaneously shunted aside) was accepted by the Senate without hesitation. This official act was the start of the *Quinquennium Neronis*, the first five years of the emperor's reign. These appear as a particularly felicitous epoch of Roman imperial history in the primary literature and, for the most part, in the secondary as well.⁶⁸ But this perspective is somewhat naïve to say the least. For it disregards both the nature of sovereignty as it was exercised in those first years of the Neronian "monarchy" as well as the covert yet fierce power struggle behind the scenes. That struggle also led to the deaths of virtually all those involved, and it so critically poisoned the atmosphere within the Roman upper classes that it made the escalation to the well-known final act (i.e., the forced suicide) of the emperor almost inevitable.

As I see it, the crux of the problem was the organization of rule after Claudius' death: an unholy alliance of a small clique of power-obsessed stakeholders who seemed to have only a rudimentary understanding of the political system in which they were operating. This was especially true for Agrippina. During the lifetime of Claudius,⁶⁹ but especially afterward, she was missing both the lucidity and the emotional intelligence of Livia

⁶⁸ See also Barbara Levick, "Nero's *Quinquennium*," in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History III*, ed. Carl Deroux (Brussels: Latomus, 1983), 211–25.

⁶⁹ Suet. Claud. 43–44.

who—as the wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius—survived effectively in the corridors of power for half an eternity. After the natural (or perhaps not so natural) death of her husband, Agrippina seemingly had the simple idea of taking over the regency for Claudius' young successor—and to never ever let it go. This may well have been understandable. After all: she had only gotten her son into his current position by enormous effort and painstaking intrigue in the first place.⁷⁰ But her strategy was not particularly prudent. A haremlike system in which the nominal ruler is a puppet in a golden cage, incapacitated by others,⁷¹ was not state-of-the-art practice in first-century Rome. Rather, it was deemed a slap in the face of the meritocratic orientation of the regime. For, as the system had been set up by Augustus, no ruler was supposed to be without proof of his excellence. Yet the self-appointed triumvirate had not foreseen an authoritative role for Nero. Quite the opposite: they were demonstrably in agreement that the young man would in no way become politically relevant; indeed, they deliberately prevented him from developing any customary social role. And this conclusion does not exactly coincide with what humanists might have preferred to see as the relationship between Seneca and Nero. We would naturally all like it better if it had been the way we read so often: i.e., that Seneca's educational mission must have been directed toward making the young man a better, more qualified ruler. Among other things, this renowned representative of the Roman intelligentsia was supposed to have discouraged Nero from all-too-common-place pleasures like acting, singing, circus, and amphitheater. In lieu of such things, Seneca might have decided to bolster his intellectual interests.⁷² Then we would perhaps be able to believe that this virtuous representative of the mind had made honest efforts with a student who could not be dissuaded from his naturally bad disposition.⁷³ Unfortunately, though, the pertinent sources claim something quite different for Seneca. Consider Suetonius—one who is not exactly known for giving Nero

⁷⁰ Tac. Ann. 12, 64; 12, 69; Suet. Nero 6, 2; 6, 4; 7, 1; Dio 61, 7.

⁷¹ Dio 61, 4.

⁷² Manfred Fuhrmann, *Seneca und Kaiser Nero. Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Fest, 1997), 164–74.

⁷³ Fuhrmann, *Seneca und Kaiser Nero*, 175–96; Gregor Maurach, *Seneca. Leben und Werk*, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 35.

undue credit—when describing the education of the prince: “Even as a boy, [Nero] came into contact with all the free arts. But his mother persuaded him to stay away from philosophy by pointing out that it did not suit a future ruler; and his teacher Seneca kept him from studying the ancient orators so that Nero might continue to admire him. That is why he became more inclined toward poetry.”⁷⁴

Here the composing of verses operates plainly as an option subordinate to more status-relevant intellectual alternatives. Against the backdrop of Seneca's formidable position in the Roman state apparatus, it seems merely a cheap excuse to maintain that it might have harmed Nero to study the philosophy of applying political power. Evidently, his “caretakers” sought to discourage the young man from the idea of autonomous rule even before he came to power; his status as a puppet had been prepared much earlier. As a singer and poet and with no military or administrative experience, it must have seemed that Nero's role would irreversibly become a nonpolitical one, so that he would not stand in the way of others governing. The fact that this plan did not work out was essentially due to the political illiteracy of the would-be regents. They should have known that it would not be possible, under the communicative conditions of Rome, to politically neutralize the (ostensibly) most powerful man on earth. Firstly, the new sovereign would have to project a unique image in order to survive in the first place. Secondly, there were enough members of the Roman elite who had no interest at all in having a particular clique fence in their sovereign. The young man was, as things stood, a form of social capital, one whom interested parties in Rome merely needed to bow down to. And precisely that is what some of them did who wanted to make their careers by getting close to the emperor—or who did not care for Agrippina and Seneca's regime of patronage. In a system in which acquiring status was considered a zero-sum game, any gain within one narrow group must have seemed like a setback to another.

Consequently, the struggles broke out almost immediately after Claudius' death. In particular, conflicts between Nero and Agrippina escalated when it became clear that the young man was not satisfied with the role intended for him. For her part, however, Agrippina was not will-

⁷⁴ Suet. Nero 52.

ing to change her plan for how power would be allocated in the Roman state. The fact that she was said to have given her son a near ultimatum—that Britannicus could just as easily be made the ruler⁷⁵—just goes to show how fierce the fighting might become. Under those circumstances, it strengthened Nero's position considerably when his stepbrother was killed around February 55 CE, i.e., less than six months after the change of regime.⁷⁶ For that reason, there was no alternative to the autocracy of Nero, at least from the perspective of those nearest to him. But the killing of Britannicus, though demonstrably shifting things in favor of Nero, was definitely not something the young man did on his own. To carry out such a deed contrary to the will of the true powers of Rome would most certainly have exceeded his abilities at that point in time. For when there was not yet a tailor-made, perfectly delineated role for Nero, the presence of a second candidate for the throne would have created persistent uncertainty for the regime just as it was getting established. A second puppet, then, would have produced intense discord among the senatorial elite—as already had happened so frequently in the history of the Roman Empire. That in turn would have posed considerable risks for keeping the (internal) peace, not to speak of the survival of Nero and his entourage. In that sense, the murder of Britannicus was in all likelihood a joint effort of those who had benefited from Claudius' death. Yet, at the same time, this act was also the first step in emancipating Nero from his multiple guardians. In the meantime, a circle of aristocrats was likely gathering around him.⁷⁷ We can presume that, among this set, the opinion prevailed that Nero would not become independent unless Agrippina relinquished her role. In the next few years, there was a tenacious struggle over how this would occur. Since the collaboration between Seneca, Burrus,

⁷⁵ Tac. Ann. 13, 14, 2. Suet. Nero 34, 1 gives evidence that Nero tried to stir up hatred against his mother by repeatedly suggesting that he would abdicate and move to Rhodes on account of her. These conflicts, to some degree carried out publicly, speak decisively against Meier's thesis of an apolitical young Nero (Meier, "Qualis artifex pereo," 588–89). The issue here was not the classic field of foreign policy but instead a central and controversial political agenda, through which the persona of the emperor was being negotiated.

⁷⁶ Cf. Champlin, *Nero*, 151.

⁷⁷ Salvius Otho and Claudius Senecio are the primary ones to be named here (Tac. Ann. 13, 12; Suet. Otho 2, 2–3, 1).

and Agrippina was more an alliance of convenience than a stable relationship, Nero succeeded in ousting his mother bit by bit from the nerve center of power. First she was deprived of her guard and security detail, and then she herself was removed from Rome.⁷⁸ It can no longer be determined precisely who ultimately arranged the matricide that finally emancipated Nero. Yet, by the time of Agrippina's death (at the latest), the golden cage solution for the young emperor had failed once and for all. After that, Burrus' days as a praetorian prefect were numbered as well, and he died more or less naturally in 62 CE.⁷⁹ Seneca, the third member of the *mésalliance*, immediately discerned the signs of the times and largely retired from public life after Burrus' death.⁸⁰ He survived until 64 CE, when he was associated with a larger conspiracy, and Nero ordered him to commit suicide. His role in Nero's ascent to power had been as unfortunate as it was unpleasant. From the start, it had clearly not been so astute to combine the image of the impartial Stoic philosopher with that of the pragmatist striving openly for all kinds of political (and economic) advantages. In any event, his social peers were highly displeased with his quasi-imperial manner of holding court and his immense (self-) enrichment at the same time he was claiming to have moral authority.⁸¹ Many in Rome doubtless wished nothing more than to see Seneca overthrown; there was hardly any hint of aristocratic solidarity with the great philosopher. And none of this was so remarkable: if we look beyond the man's philosophical treatises—the originality of which has incidentally been disputed—the image that remains is of an unscrupulous opportunist. His decision to ridicule his late benefactor, the just-deified Claudius, in the form of a caustic satire,⁸² was as much a service to a young Nero seeking to distance himself from his adoptive father, as was his participation in Britannicus' murder. Moreover, Tacitus assures us that Seneca also took part in planning the murder of Agrippina. Regardless of what might have happened, he drafted a document presented to the Senate in which

⁷⁸ Suet. Nero 34, 1.

⁷⁹ Suet. Nero 35, 5; Tac. Ann. 14, 51.

⁸⁰ Tac. Ann. 14, 56, 3.

⁸¹ Tac. Ann. 14, 52–14, 53, 1.

⁸² The so-called *Apokolokyntosis* (pumpkinification) of *Claudius*; on this, see Schubert, *Studien zum Nerobild in der lateinischen Dichtung der Antike*, 15–33.

all the good (or less good) reasons were enumerated of how the state might justify her death. In the end, after Burrus' demise, Seneca tried to save at least his life and part of the fortune he had amassed in the boom years by making disclosures that were servile and humiliating; he did so in clear recognition of the fact that he had lost power for good.⁸³ All in all, he was neither the architect of a better autocracy nor an earnest partisan fighting the arbitrary despotism of a bad ruler. Instead, he behaved more like a Carl Schmitt or Albert Speer. Be that as it may, he contributed substantially to the unparalleled level of scheming at the imperial court in Nero's first years.

The story of Nero's emancipation—and with that, we have truly come full circle—was likewise the story of his role as an artist. It is truly exceptional that every increase in his actual power was accompanied by an increase in the visibility of his skills as a singer. Immediately after Claudius' death, Nero made an excellent publicity move by attracting to his court the cithara virtuoso Terpnos, thus demonstrating precisely the type of role he preferred. It was certainly no random coincidence that the emperor's first public performance was in close temporal proximity to the killing of his mother. And his ultimate theatrical breakthrough in 64 CE eventually coincided with the Pisonian conspiracy, to which Seneca also fell victim. In this way, his more or less public singing, along with composing poetry and performing, became the basis of his imperial role, the specific sign of his self-portrayal.

⁸³ Tac. Ann. 14, 53, 2–14, 54. In this debate concerning the role of Seneca in Nero's state—one which was hypocritical on both sides—Tacitus renders Nero the clear winner (see also Fuhrmann, *Seneca und Kaiser Nero*, 272–73). The somewhat unfriendly image of Seneca sketched in my present essay follows, even in its fundamentals, the account given by the Roman historian. For Seneca was at best a questionable political figure (especially when compared with Thrasea Paetus). Methodologically, it seems generally more productive to start by separating Seneca's public activities from his philosophical writings, rather than explaining one with the other. Otherwise, one may draw problematic conclusions, such as (for example) that Seneca never aspired to the position of power which he held (as in Fuhrmann, *Seneca und Kaiser Nero*, 174). Or one might speculate that the psychological collateral damage of a blood-soaked realpolitik (as in the murders of Britannicus and Agrippina) had an effect on the sensitive soul of a philosopher (according to Malitz, "Der Herrscher als Künstler," 21–40).

In the process, he had acquired a new skill, one that was practiced in aristocratic circles and had positive associations. If there was something he was better at than those of his general status, then this was it. For starters, it was only consistent that it provided him with a personal sense of excellence.⁸⁴ Of course, it would have been safer to choose more conventional sources for self-esteem, such as military accomplishments or rhetorical brilliance. However, Nero simply did not have these at his disposal. What he could do—or thought he could—as the most powerful person on earth was to change the rules for acquiring prestige in Rome. One indicator of his systematic efforts was to get members of the traditional ruling class to perform on stage⁸⁵ and thereby counter the charge that public performance was only something for foreigners or the underprivileged. Such discursive efforts were noticeably accompanied by an equally systematic devaluation of the military in the Roman context.⁸⁶ And Nero was also consistent in developing sounding boards that were able to furnish politically relevant public spheres for the linkage of power and art or of performance and status. These included galvanizing the Greek cultural sphere in southern Italy⁸⁷ and valorizing the eastern half of the empire. The fact that he liberated the Greeks from both taxes and Roman repression when his tour of Greece⁸⁸ ended shows the permeability between the aesthetics of his role and his activities as sovereign. Just how effective Neronian performance was in the East, despite all the frustrations of that moment, can be seen if nothing else in the fact that several cases were observed there after his death of individuals who sought to promote their policy objectives as

⁸⁴ See also C. E. Manning, "Acting and Nero's Conception of the Principate," *Greece & Rome* 22 (1975): 164–75.

⁸⁵ Suet. Nero 11.

⁸⁶ Hence, Nero conferred the honors (of *ornamenta triumphalia*) without having had military victories to precede them (Suet. Nero 15, 2). Moreover, Nero (Suet. Nero 20, 2) attempted to neutralize the military sector as a rival by forcing the successful and high-ranking General Corbulo to commit suicide (Suet. Nero 20, 2). At the same time, he commissioned Vespasian, a social nobody in the eyes of the aristocracy, to lead the war against the Jews.

⁸⁷ Suet. Nero 25, 1 (on Naples as the cultural capital of Italy) and 22, 3 (on the particular capacity of the Greeks to value Nero's talent).

⁸⁸ On this proclamation of freedom, Suet. Nero 24, 2; Alcock, "Nero at Play?," 103; Meier, "Qualis artifex pereo," 594–95.

reincarnated Neros.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, an artistry bolstered by power could not be certain of its legitimacy among the populace in the city of Rome. Here too, however, the emperor was sensitive to context and cultivated a strategy to encourage acceptance, relying especially on communication with the *plebs urbana* who were veritably obsessed with spectacle. Nero tried to appeal by all the means available to the broader urban masses at the theaters and amphitheaters, and at the Odeia and the Circus, thus attempted to render irrelevant his inevitable departure from the traditional standards of the elite.⁹⁰ To be sure, by racing chariots (“popular” culture) and competing theatrically (“elite” culture), the emperor was appealing to the essential constituencies in the capital. The fact that it still did not work out was demonstrated when Nero was forced to commit suicide (*qualis artifex pereo*—“what an artist dies with me”⁹¹) after the old aristocrat Servius Sulpicius Galba organized a coup against him and the Senate proclaimed him a public enemy.⁹² At the same time, though, one should not overlook the impact his redefinition of status formulas had had in the capital. Nero was venerated in an unauthorized procession through Rome’s winding streets, rivaled only by the one that had followed the assassination of Caesar a hundred years earlier.⁹³

In the end, singing in public did not prove a viable option for grabbing the wolf of Roman autocracy by the ears. This fact was unquestionably linked to the elementary presence of things military in the *Imperium Romanum*. For it was unlikely that the border troops of an empire that stretched from the Rhine to the Euphrates would be very accepting of a

⁸⁹ On this, see Paul A. Gallivan, “The False Neros: A Re-examination,” *Historia* 22 (1973): 364–65.

⁹⁰ An essential element of this self-depiction of the city was the establishment of games that would be more novel and highly opulent, i.e., the founding of the *Neronia* (Suet. Nero 11–12); on this, see Champlin, *Nero*, 72–73.

⁹¹ Those were supposedly his parting words, according to Suet. Nero 49, 1.

⁹² On these events in detail, cf. Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern*, 240–92.

⁹³ Suet. Nero 57, 1; Egon Flaig, “La fin de la popularité Néon et la Plèbe à la fin d règne,” in *Rome à l’époque néronienne. Institutions et vie politique, économie et société, vie intellectuelle, artistique et spirituelle*, ed. Jean-Michael Croisille and Yves Perrin (Brussels: Latomus, 2002), 361–74; on Caesar: Ulrich Gotter, *Der Diktator ist tot! Politik in Rom zwischen den Iden des März und der Begründung des Zweiten Triumvirats* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), 40–41.

long-haired, perfumed emperor who sang, composed verses, and acted in an Apollonian, effeminate manner. Nonetheless, before it was put to the test by Nero, it was anything but clear that this argument might prevail against the artistic self-expansion of a sovereign. To understand this, it was going to take at least a paradigm shift in the perception of the empire. Or to borrow from Tacitus, it meant divulging the *arcanum imperii*: that emperors could also be made *outside* of Rome.⁹⁴ After Nero's death, this became common knowledge—and the combination of singing and ruling remained just an episode.

Translated by David A. Brenner

⁹⁴ Tac. Hist. I, 4.

Benito Mussolini (1883–1945)

“Babeuf” (1902)

Thermidor prevails and accursed
Fall the ranks of rebels.—The priest
From over the border, sinisterly gazes
At the axe bloodied in plebeian veins.

Vengeance advances silently
With wrath born of exile and danger.
Oh! The good days and the epic time of the “cannonade”
Passed like lightening.

But Baboeuf smiled—
In his dying eyes flashed the Idea,
The vision of centuries to come

And the supreme thought that sustained him,
However now defeated, was to invoke the retribution
Of the infernal legion of the Ardennes.¹

¹ Benito Mussolini, “Babeuf” (1902), in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, vol. 1 (Florence: La Fenice, 1964), 27 (English translation by R. J. B. Bosworth). The name “Baboeuf” in the ninth line of the poem was misspelled by Mussolini in the Italian original.

Poetry and Tyranny: The Case of Benito Mussolini

RICHARD JAMES BOON BOSWORTH

Where words were concerned, Benito Mussolini, fascist Duce lording over Italy from 1922 to July 1943 (and then, restored by his Nazi allies in the troubled role of “puppet dictator” from September 1943 until his death on 28 April 1945), was a fertile creator. His “complete” works have been assembled in forty-four volumes,² and, despite their length, they exclude much more material. Probably the most lasting image of this Italian dictator is of him orating, his body, face, and hands in constant if jerky movement with the passion of his phrase making, words bellowed from a balcony or some other elevated spot to the crowd below. The audience was a necessary part of this *mise-en-scène*. The dictator resounds into the present as the conductor of a modern political antiphony, needing and receiving response from a star-struck crowd, chanting “Duce, Duce, Duce,” “Eia, Eia, Eia, alalà,” “A Noi,” and the other simple slogans of the regime. The crowd’s place was loyally to fill any pauses in the oration. When, finally, there was silence, regime propagandists claimed (to approval from some contemporary historians) that this staged charisma had fused leader and people into a mystical union. The enactment of the Duce, as it were, had provided a modern political version of sexual orgasm or religious transubstantiation. Here was the full expression of totalitarian rule over the human spirit.

Perhaps. As a historian of fascist politics and society, I retain major doubts about whether, under this “Italian dictatorship,” the momentary

² Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, ed. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, 36 vols. (La Fenice: Florence, 1951–63); vols. 37–44 (Rome: Giovanni Volpe editore, 1978–80). Hereafter cited as BMOO.

drama of political ceremony or the pervasive (if not very numerous) secret police really engineered the people's souls into a purely fascist modernity.³ Nonetheless, Mussolini's excursions into literature broadly defined are worth review. Here was a political leader, first trained as an elementary schoolteacher (of French), who rapidly made a splash as a journalist, the latter a career that he never entirely abandoned and, even in the desperate days of Italy's Second World War, remained nostalgic about. Here, too, was an author who, in his youth, published poetry, a novel, a piece of religious history, and a partial autobiography. In 1913–14 he edited a philosophical journal (officially a fortnightly but with erratic appearance), entitled with high ambition *Utopia*.⁴ Once he split from socialism to favor Italy's version of the First World War and eventually himself served at the front, he wrote a war diary, following 1922 elevated to be the holy writ of patriotic soldiering and compulsory reading for every schoolchild.⁵ Even after he became dictator, he found time to sponsor another, more general (if ghostwritten) autobiography, at least officially he cowrote three plays, and himself scripted two pious books of remembrance, one of his brother, Arnaldo (died 1931) and the other of his second son, Bruno (killed on 7 August 1941 when acting as a test pilot during the Second War). There was even a last attempt at contemporary history when Mussolini assembled a short account of the events of July 1943, his first fall and its aftermath.⁶ At all times he was a fertile letter writer, despite experiencing deep depression and fading eyesight, sending Claretta Petacci, his last lover, 318 often lengthy missives between 10 October 1943 and 18 April 1945.⁷

³ For my own review of the historiographical debates, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998).

⁴ It was reedited by Mussolini's indefatigable Italian biographer, Renzo De Felice, as Benito Mussolini, *Utopia: rivista quindicinale del socialismo rivoluzionario italiano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1973).

⁵ Benito Mussolini, *Il mio diario di guerra (1915–1917)* (Milan: Imperia, Casa editrice del Partito Nazionale Fascista, 1923).

⁶ For English-language biography, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). In Italian, the fundamental study remains Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini*, 8 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1965–97).

⁷ See Benito Mussolini, *A Clara: tutte le lettere a Clara Petacci 1943–1945*, ed. Luisa Montevocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 2011).

Such writings were all very well but, like many of his contemporaries, Mussolini cleaved to a hierarchy of the humanities, in which philosophy stood at the pinnacle of intellectual endeavor. When the dictator contemplated his own brilliance, which he did frequently if on occasion with an almost endearing uneasiness, his excursions into philosophy pleased him most. Then he knew that his mind had forged the meaning of fascism, “the ideology of the twentieth century,” and continued to do so in his every speech, comment, and article. In brief, there was the “doctrine of fascism,” “rewritten” by the dictator from a draft by the regime philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, and published in a volume of the new *Enciclopedia italiana* in time for the regime’s grandiose celebration of its tenth anniversary in 1932.⁸ Thereafter, university students in Italy were obliged to do compulsory courses in Mussolinian philosophy, while the Duce was accustomed to leave the works of, say, Plato, ostentatiously open on his desk when being visited by foreign or domestic dignitaries (occasionally such apparent readings were supplemented by Italian and foreign poetry).⁹ When, on 29 July 1943, Mussolini turned sixty in his royal prison, he was presumably gratified to be sent the complete works of Friedrich Nietzsche in German as sustaining or reviving reading by his friend, Adolf Hitler. At least while the regime survived, the “thought of Benito Mussolini” was hailed as a natural addition to the list of Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and the rest. And Mussolini does seem genuinely to have liked philosophical discussion, if better with admiring young women than with questingly independent intellectuals.¹⁰

The profundity and consistency of Mussolini’s own philosophy remain an issue of dispute, with some commentators insisting that he was an original and significant thinker.¹¹ A widespread view, and certainly my own, is

⁸ BMOO XXXIV, 115–38. For analysis of the input of Mussolini and Gentile, see Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce 1. Gli anni di consenso 1929–1936* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 35–38.

⁹ For one case after September 1943, see Rudolf Rahn, *Ambasciatore di Hitler a Vichy e a Salò* (Milan: Garzanti, 1950), 287. Rahn also noticed Mussolini having apparently just put down a volume of the German romantic poet, Eduard von Mörike.

¹⁰ In this regard, see Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 314, for the case of Elena Curti.

¹¹ The most pertinacious advocate of this view in English is A. James Gregor. See, for example, A. James Gregor, *Mussolini’s Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

that Mussolini aimed more at immediate power than at lasting meaning and, in any case, a short essay is no place to give a full review of what Mussolini made of Italy and fascism and of what they made of him.

Yet, it is worthwhile to narrow the focus onto Mussolini's literary endeavors and see what they reveal about him, Italy, fascism and its version of totalitarianism. In this regard, the dictator was scarcely the only Italian political figure to dabble in creative writing (or to be proud of being addressed as "professor").¹² Of the "heroes" of the Risorgimento, Giuseppe Garibaldi penned at least four novels, although with uneven success (the last, *Manlio*, did not find a publisher until 1982).¹³ Giuseppe Mazzini was self-consciously the poetic philosopher of the nation, his first publication in 1826 being his essay "Dell'amor patrio di Dante" (On Dante's patriotic love). In these years of his apprenticeship, Mazzini read deeply in European romantic poetry and literature, hoping himself to write historical novels and plays.¹⁴ In the event, this activity was left to such other nationalists as Massimo D'Azeglio of Piedmont or Francesco Guerrazzi of Tuscany, but Mazzini's persona as a revolutionary and prophet never lost its poetic sheen. As a result, in recent times, historian Alberto Banti has revived the view that Italy was "made" as much by words as by blood and iron.¹⁵ Equally, the Catholic Church, although the defeated "victim" of the political triumph of liberal Italy, scarcely surrendered to the national version of modernity and its economic and military power. Rather, Catholicism continued to craft a place for itself in Italian souls and identities, relying on words and their mystery as its chief support.¹⁶

There was, therefore, considerable irony in the fact that the medieval religious poet Dante Alighieri was elevated by liberal nationalists to be the

¹² In her own ghost-written memoirs, his wife would say that she was expected to address him with this title (earned through his qualifications as a schoolteacher) until 1927. See Rachele Mussolini, *The Real Mussolini as Told to A. Zarca* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1973), 66.

¹³ Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 374.

¹⁴ Denis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 2–3.

¹⁵ See, for example, Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: parentela, santità e onore dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006).

¹⁶ For review, see Lucy Riall, "Martyr Cults in Nineteenth-Century Italy," *Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010): 255–84.

peerless “father of the nation.” From 1889 patriots could join the Società Dante Alighieri, set up in Rome and bringing under its banner the best and the brightest of nonsocialist political and intellectual circles. Pasquale Villari, university professor, distinguished Renaissance historian and sometime conservative liberal minister of education, was the association’s first president. Dante, it was said, as well as inventing the national language, had prefigured Italian political independence and framed the nation’s ideal frontiers, whether in the Alto Adige or Südtirol, bordering the Germanic world, or in Trieste and Istria, abutting the “Slavs.” One of the political sensations of pre-1914 Europe was the inauguration in 1896 at Trento, an Italian-speaking city still governed by the Habsburgs and the object of Italian “irredentism,” of a statue to Dante, wearing a laurel wreath and making what fascists would later maintain was a “Roman” salute. Given the pervasiveness of Dante’s myth, it was perhaps inevitable that Italy’s first “dreadnought” or modern battleship, launched in 1911 as part of the celebration of the nation’s fiftieth anniversary, should be named the *Dante Alighieri*.¹⁷

Poetry and the other arts retained a prominent place in the political disputes and ambitions and, therefore, in the worldview, of post-Risorgimento Italy. The liberal elite was an avowedly humanist one. Members of parliament were typically lawyers and/or journalists, men proud to have the title “prof.” or “avv.” (*avvocato*) attached to their names. A sociologist has estimated that the membership of the Chamber of Deputies between 1903 and 1913 was composed of 27 percent lawyers, 7 percent other professionals, 28 percent intellectuals of some definition, 16 percent bureaucrats, 16 percent from a military background, while only 4 percent were landowners and 1 percent came from business. There were virtually no peasants (then still the majority of the population) or workers.¹⁸ Any observer of liberal Italian parliamentary rhetoric is at once aware that philosophical, poetic, and literary citation mattered more than the “factual.” No wonder that aspirant player on the national political stage, Benito Mussolini,

¹⁷ R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 49–52. The Dante statue “answered” that of the medieval German poet, Walther von der Vogelweide, erected at Bözen (Bolzano) in 1886.

¹⁸ Paolo Farneti, *Sistema politico e società civile: saggi di teoria e ricerca politica* (Turin: Edizioni Giappichelli, 1971), 180.

curbed too much socialist talk about equality to insist on the recognition of his (modest) academic qualifications, doubtless a *compagno* (comrade) but also a *professore*.

Nor did matters change when the approach of the First World War unleashed challenge to what increasingly seemed the too cozy certainties of liberal governance. Italy might have remained the least of the Great Powers when measured by coal and iron production, its sinews of war, its imperial spread and even its population, but, as wordsmiths, Italians took a prominent place in what has been called the “Generation of 1914.” Most lively were the futurists, led by F. T. Marinetti. This group’s manifesto announced that war was “the only cure for the world,” while one daringly blasphemous intellectual parodied the Sermon on the Mount to urge the modernization and spiritual unification of Italy through the sacrament of spilled blood. Where poetry was concerned, the futurists were creative in their endeavors to industrialize and militarize words, with Marinetti’s *Zang Tumb Tumb* constructing a soundscape of the siege of Adrianople in the Balkan Wars and the movement pioneering what came to be called “concrete poetry.” At least on the surface, the futurists proclaimed an overcoming of the past and “freedom” from all restraint, with Marinetti in 1913 maintaining characteristically that the new man will

begin by brutally destroying the syntax of his speech. He wastes no time in building sentences. Punctuation and the right adjective will mean nothing to him. He will despise subtleties and nuances of language. Breathlessly he will assault your nerves with visual and olfactory sensations, just as they come to him. The rush of steam-emotion will burst the sentence’s steam pipe, the valves of punctuation, and the adjectival clamp. Fistfuls of essential words in no conventional order. Sole preoccupation of the narrator, to render every vibration of his being.¹⁹

Some commentators are sure that futurist words and thoughts, their militant irrationalism, presaged fascism and, at least in 1919, Marinetti was an activist in the same causes that attracted the initial membership of the *fasci di combattimento* (combat or fighting groups), founded under Mussolini’s

¹⁹ Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 98.

leadership at Milan in March that year.²⁰ Moreover, throughout the fascist regime and even when it had accepted subordination to its more powerful Nazi ally, Mussolini and other regime chieftains never discarded their favorable response to futurism, remaining more open to the “modern” in all forms of art than was Adolf Hitler, with his old-fashioned petit bourgeois preference for the representational.²¹

Yet, viewed on any but their own terms, the Italian futurists never resolved major contradictions as they endeavored so manfully to skewer the national bourgeoisie from the comfort of their own lives. The aggression of their nationalist pronouncements needs to be qualified by their evident desire to be lionized in Paris, the international cultural capital so much grander than backward, clerical, and provincial Rome. Marinetti’s explosive reports from the Balkans were first published in French in the newspaper *L’Intransigeant*.²² Similarly his open applause of “contempt for women” needs conditioning by the knowledge that he eventually married a much younger partner with her own intellectual ambitions and she seems to have henpecked him. But the best symbol of the ambiguities of these rhetorical revolutionaries is Umberto Boccioni’s painting *La città che sale*, first exhibited in Milan in April 1911, an international success (ironically helped by the coincidence with liberal Italy’s fiftieth anniversary) and now to be found at MOMA in New York. Boccioni had declared his intention to depict “the fruit of our industrial era” and the most obvious message of the work is the tumultuous and dynamic growth of a city of factories and tenements. Yet the horsepower which dominates the painting is that of the animal not the machine.²³ Unconsciously, therefore, *La città che sale* ex-

²⁰ For the fullest recent review, see Walter L. Adamson, *Avant-Gardes: Modernism’s Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

²¹ The best general study of the cultural scene in Fascist Italy is Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

²² Marianne W. Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory, 1909–1915* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 186. His less concrete poetry was also written in French and so was his major play, *Le Roi Bombance*. Even the original “Futurist Manifesto” was first published in French in the Paris paper *Le Figaro* in 1909.

²³ See Umberto Boccioni, *L’opera completa*, ed. Gianfranco Bruno (Milan: Rizzoli, 1969), xx–xxi; 119.

presses Italian backwardness when compared with Northern and Western Europe or the United States rather better than it does modernity.

Yet the futurists did provide the cultural fireworks that accompanied Italy's participation in the First World War and would continue on occasion to sparkle during the rise and rule of fascism. To give one example: Ferdinando Depero, a younger member of the movement, remained significant as a fascist, even under Salò. He can, for example, be found stating that that party's black shirt was magically able to resist any chemical or extreme war assault, being "supple at home but rigid in ceremony, impossible for machine gunning to penetrate, sown with daggers and buttoned with bullets."²⁴ Whether such fervent phrases really convinced all Italian wearers of the party uniform (usually only a Saturday event) or much hardened the regime's war efforts must remain questionable.

In any case, the most prominent poet in the years from 1914 to 1922 was not Marinetti but Gabriele D'Annunzio, a man whose superabundant words, florid phrasing, and titivating sexuality were all that the futurists despised in Italy. D'Annunzio is an extraordinary figure, the most remarkable example of art in politics in any country throughout the twentieth century. It was D'Annunzio, after all, who led the so-called "interventionism of the piazza," that, with greater or lesser effect, jostled Antonio Salandra and Sidney Sonnino, Italy's conservative liberal political chiefs in 1914–15, toward their decision in favor of war entry. Many historians agree that the nationalist demonstrations in Italian cities in May 1915 struck a body blow against parliamentary decorum and the rule of law, and paved the way for fascist "squadrist" violence after 1919. Once Italy was at war, it was D'Annunzio and not the politicians who embodied modern, "total," combat at least in the minds of junior officers; it was he who was girt with the charisma of war in a way that was impossible to match by diminutive King Victor Emmanuel III, the nation's cautious, nervous, and depressed military chiefs and the crew of lackluster liberal politicians.²⁵ It was D'Annunzio who, in 1919, led the March on Fiume (Rijeka). There he es-

²⁴ Antonio Spinoso, *Starace* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1981), 49. For an example of the stubborn survival of his ideas, see Fortunato Depero, *A passo romano: lirismo fascista e guerriero programmatico e costruttivo* (Rovereto: Fascio di Trento, 1943).

²⁵ For a case study of this matter in 1916, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship* (London: Penguin, 2005), 80–81.

established a “lyrical dictatorship” that gave first performance to much of what would emerge as the scenography of fascism, becoming what has been termed the “First Duce.”²⁶ So prestigious was the poet that, in July 1920, Mussolini could grovelingly write to him of his willingness to serve as “your simple soldier,” while fascists doubtful whether Mussolini was really their ideal leader were still hopeful of some deal with D’Annunzio only a few months before the March on Rome.²⁷ Even after that event, D’Annunzio retained widespread appeal and Mussolini was always alert to deflecting it, soon promoting the poet to be the Prince of Montenevoso and ensuring him the most comfortable of retirements in his palace, the Vittoriale, beside Lago di Garda. Today the place remains a “national heritage site,” extraordinary in its revelation of the eclecticism or confusion of D’Annunzio’s interests and taste but evidence, too, that his charisma has never fully dissipated.

In sum, D’Annunzio, in friendly eyes, can be seen as a writer of span and achievement and, in unfriendly, as a poseur of few redeeming qualities. If some “virtual historian,” following the tracks of Niall Ferguson,²⁸ should compile a counterfactual history of Italy where D’Annunzio and not Mussolini became the nation’s Duce, the test of imagining such a man dealing with the budget (his creditors were always at the door) or with the ordinary detail of any serious policy would be an arduous one. Whatever the failing of the second Duce, and they were many, he was surely a more credible executive than was the poet. Art and reality may not be binary opposites but it must be conceded that, for Mussolini, the “facts” were always a nearer concern than they were for Gabriele D’Annunzio.

But what, then, of Mussolini the writer? His story begins when he was still a schoolboy at Forlì in the Romagna, starting during his last years under a headmaster who was the brother of Giosuè Carducci, liberal Italy’s most celebrated, if often discontented, poet (and winner of the 1906 Nobel Prize in Literature), an anticlericalist and patriot. Mussolini was

²⁶ For a description, see Michael Arthur Ledeen, *The First Duce: D’Annunzio at Fiume* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

²⁷ Renzo De Felice and Emilio Mariano, eds., *Carteggio D’Annunzio–Mussolini 1919–1938* (Milan: Mondadori, 1971), 35; Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 110–15; 174.

²⁸ Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

then a committed socialist, bent on following the track of his father, Alessandro, or the first national socialist chief, Andrea Costa, a family acquaintance and another local (he came from nearby Imola). It was therefore predictable that Mussolini should begin to pen sonnets; sometimes they dealt with such anodyne topics as the beauty of spring and the recovery of a family friend from serious illness.²⁹ More revelatory was an effort at apotheosizing Gracchus Babeuf, defeated chief of the “Conspiracy of Equals” in Paris in 1796 and, to his fans, the “first communist.”³⁰ It deserves quotation:

Termidoro trionfo e maledetta
Cade la schiera dei ribelli.—Guata
Torbido il prete dal confin l'accetta
Nelle arterie plebee insanguinata.

Sordo avanza il furor della vendetta
Negli esili e nei rischi germinata.
Oh passaro i bei dì come saetta
Gli epici giorni della “cannonata.”

Ma sorride Baboeuf [sic].—Ne' morituri
Occhi gli passa il lampo dell'Idea,
La vision dei secoli venturi.

E il supreme pensier che lo sostenne
Quando ormai vinto, vindice chiedea
La legione infernale delle Ardenne.³¹

Although probably written in 1899–1900, the sonnet was only published in 1902, at the appropriate time—May Day—and in the appropriate place—the worthily socialist local paper, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore*.

²⁹ BMOO I, 229–30.

³⁰ See, for example, this English-language biography: Robert Barrie Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978).

³¹ BMOO I, 27. Cf. also the longer “Nei Dì dei morti,” 21–22.

The themes of the poem are ones that continued to preoccupy Mussolini for the next decade as he rose to edit socialist papers at Trento and then in his hometown of Forlì (this last newssheet had the predictable title of *La lotta di classe*). They were still his in 1912 when he made the transfer from the provinces to Italy's most important city, Milan, and became editor of *Avanti!*, the national daily paper of the socialist movement. Only after the onset of European war in October 1914 would Mussolini break from his socialism when he told his comrades that anyone with hope in real revolution must back Italian war entry. These, then, were the years of a Marxist Mussolini, like Babeuf serving a grand ideal, armed with a meta-narrative that explained past, present, and future, working for the oppressed proletariat and rejecting out of hand the false consciousness preached by priests, corrupt and ignorant in their pernicious rejection of science and modernity.

But, often, there were hints of something more, something not quite identical with the sacred texts of vulgar Marxism. Mussolini's very first publication was an essay entitled "Il romanzo russo," almost painful in its effort to range widely and simultaneously suggesting that the youth's internationalist meditations carried with them a voluntarism that ran beyond strictly "scientific" thought. So, the article announced that great writing "transcended borders" and expressed the "universal." Italians, Mussolini argued, were bewitched by "a too individual subjectivity," the French by "a pressing nationalism," the Germans by "metaphysics." Only Russian writers, he concluded firmly, despite the oppression of tsarist absolutism, "exposed societal corruption and vivisected the cancer" as a committed intellectual must.³²

Plainly, the young Mussolini was reaching out from the Romagna to comprehend the world. Yet, he is not well understood merely as a card-carrying internationalist socialist. He, too, was another Italian who engaged with Dante, as has been seen so ubiquitous a figure in the pre-1914 cultural debate. Under the regime, with the institution of its personality cult that rendered its Duce infallible—a ubiquitous slogan boasted that *Mussolini ha sempre ragione*—one guileless commentator had no doubt that Dante, with his "utterly sublime and mighty Italian intelligence" had

³² BMOO I, 3–4.

“conceived and foreshadowed what is now being created under the prodigious hand of our Magnificent Duce.” For an authorized fascist, the medieval poet and the contemporary political leader fused across the centuries, with Mussolini destined to bring to a united nation what Dante had prophesied for it: “order, honesty, wisdom, love and virtue.”³³ A more acerbic comprehension of the coming dictator’s engagement with Dante is possible. As a schoolboy, his contemporaries recalled, Mussolini’s special passion was these writings: “he knew whole *canti* of the *Divina Commedia*.” But it was not the politics, let alone the religious meaning, of the medieval poet, that won over the youth, but rather the sound of the words. Wandering the streets of Forlì at night, alone and dressed in black, he loved to shout into the ether Dantean denunciations of human failings and punishment.³⁴ Mussolini converted the *Divine Comedy* into his own political weapon, assaulting the mute town as it slept (and tigerishly promising, at least to himself, that, eventually, he would win a larger and more receptive audience and prove that there was nothing outside the text or even inside it, except sounds and emotion).

So much may have been a promise of domination through well-marshaled words. Yet poetry had a more everyday purpose for this young and restless Romagnole. One of the publishing revelations of recent years has been an edition of the diaries of Claretta Petacci, Mussolini’s last lover and the woman who died at his side in April 1945. Petacci obsessively recorded Mussolini’s every thought and act, notably his sexual ones, in thousands of scribbled pages. They exhibit a naked Duce in more than one sense. Very aware of being a man growing older (all the more because Petacci was two years younger than his own eldest daughter, Edda), Mussolini could grow nostalgic about his adolescence. So, he told the attentive Claretta in 1937, he had written a poem to his first love that began “*Bimba, perché mi guardi*” (Girl, why do you look at me?) that locals found so well phrased that it was set to music by the Predappio town band.³⁵ (A later observer might

³³ Domenico Venturini, *Dante Alighieri e Benito Mussolini* (Rome: Casa Editrice “Nuova Italia,” 1927), 7–8; 43.

³⁴ Sante Bedeschi and Rino Alessi, *Anni giovanili di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1939), 24–25.

³⁵ Claretta Petacci, *Mussolini segreto: diari 1932–1938*, ed. Mauro Suttora (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009), 71.

note its typical assumption that, already at eighteen, he was the cynosure of women's eyes.) Similarly, Mussolini recalled, when on his first posting as an elementary school teacher, he had automatically expressed his callow love with "flowers and poetry."³⁶

Later, he assured Claretta, that for quite a while he had been sentimental in his dreams of sex. He lived, he said, "like a poet" and viewed women with the pure love that he read about in regard to Werther, Jacopo Ortis, and other literary heroes. Eventually a trip to a brothel eliminated this rose-tinted view of life.³⁷ Yet, even with Claretta, sometimes he was found reading poetry, on one illuminating occasion that of Luigi Orsini, another Romagnole, promoted in 1911 to be professor of poetic and dramatic literature in Milan, and, after 1922, a regime notable and public orator. According to Claretta, her lover "read with his expressive voice and his own special inflection. Then he flipped the book on and read a sad poem about a boy who was dying and asked his mother for his uniform. It was simple and clear, profoundly human, so moving that his voice ran out. He was moved, he could not go on, he had a lump in his throat and stopped. Then he tried to start again. But when the boy tremblingly called on his mother who was trying comfortingly to smile during his death throes, he stopped. He had had enough; his eyes were full of tears. He pushed the book over to me." And so their love life proceeded, this tender (or mawkish) poetic moment soon replaced by an angry discussion about why Mussolini kept on his older lover, Romilda Ruspi. Then, they made love on the floor of the room "with such fury that his cries reminded me of a wounded beast." Sentimentally patriotic poetry, it seemed, was among other things still an aphrodisiac for an ageing Duce who, only the day before, had pathetically asked Claretta: "Tell me that I am still young, that I am not really fifty-five years old, that I am strong, that you cannot see [my decline]. I don't want to die."³⁸ Elevated to be a dictator of godlike powers, Mussolini, it seems, still could find love and lust in conventional verses, although Claretta and he never discussed the innumerable effusions of fas-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 236–37.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 224–25.

cist poets in thrall, whether genuine or self-interested, to the personality cult, waxing lyrical less about the nation than its dictator and guide.³⁹

This silence is of some interest. Other sources indicate that, when the mood was on him, Mussolini liked modestly to disclaim his part in creating the superman image forged for him by regime propagandists, although he remained alert to any challenge to his charisma or intimations that others of his contemporaries might be his equals. Most of the desperately trite Mussolinian literature may best be understood as an automatic sound- and image-scape in which the regime worked, with the reality of its totalitarian intrusion into all Italian souls officially assumed but never altogether believed by the vast majority and especially by a Duce, whose ageing triggered a deepening cynicism about every aspect of life and politics.⁴⁰

After 1902 Mussolini would publish no more poems. Instead, his writing was channeled into journalism, with him ready peremptorily to deal with any topic that might assist the socialist cause or make his own name shine more brightly among the young intellectuals of the movement. His next excursion into what might be viewed as literature came with the publication of a romance (initially in serial form in early 1910 in fifty-seven parts as an appendix to the local paper, *Il Popolo*) in Trento where he had been expelled in September 1909 by the Habsburg authorities. It was entitled *Claudia Particella: l'amante del Cardinale* (*grande romanzo storico dell'epoca del Cardinale Carlo Emanuele Madruzzo*).⁴¹ The story was advertised as "based on the papers of a young writer of brilliant ingenuity" but is fictional, although the Madruzzos were a major local family. One of their members

³⁹ One example is Domenico Venturini, cited above in his reflections on Mussolini and Dante. See his *L'era fascista: poema* (Rome: Casa Editrice Nuova Italia di Roma, 1936); *Limpero fascista: poema* (Rome: Casa Editrice Nuova Italia di Roma, 1936).

⁴⁰ The process can be traced in Bosworth, *Mussolini*.

⁴¹ BMOO XXXIII, 39–147. An English edition of the book appeared in 1929, the year of the signature of the Lateran Pacts, resolving the "Roman Question" between the Catholic Church and the Fascist Italian state. It was now that Pope Pius XI flatteringly labeled the Duce his "Man of Providence." The translation must have been malicious on purpose. See Benito Mussolini, *The Cardinal's Mistress* (London: Cassell, 1929). The English translation was followed by versions in Polish, Spanish, and German in 1930 and Bulgarian in 1932, each proof that Mussolini was by then a celebrity. BMOO XXXIII, vii–viii.

was cardinal archbishop in Trento during the council there that codified the Counter-Reformation and gave the city its historical fame.

The themes of *The Cardinal's Mistress* are obvious and continue the anti-clericalism that was a constant preoccupation of the young Mussolini and would need a veil drawn over it, when, in power, the Duce cohabited with the Vatican more directly than had his liberal predecessors. In 1904 Mussolini expanded on his usual short polemics to publish a thirty-page pamphlet on *L'uomo e la divinità*, hailing the triumph of rational science and the overcoming of any divinity, given that “a religious god was a contradiction in terms.” Any lingering religion, he stated, was a social “sickness.”⁴² The novel presented the same case in what might be called period “bodice ripper” form. The first page introduces the cardinal and his mistress, languidly bathing her hand in the waters of a lake, “while the silk of her dress outlined the pure form of her body, and her white face was starkly framed by her black tresses. Her eyes, enslaved by a poisonous passion, were closed.”⁴³

Mussolini was writing in pre-1914 Europe and the pornography that threads his story is less described than left to be imagined. Neither the plotting nor the characterization go beyond crass stereotypes, and it is easy to conclude that the Duce was not a lost star of some romance novel publishing venture in Italy.⁴⁴ The historic value of the novel is its revelation of the range of Mussolini's mind as he sought to advance from Predappio and Forlì to somewhere greater. Here was no strict ideologue, concentrated on ensuring that his ideas made philosophical sense, but rather a journalist, inventive and active, and with an alertness to the main chance that today better characterizes the “shock jock” than serious political commentators. As Mussolini made his way in a world that was scarcely anxious to give him space, any means would do to attract public attention.

Nor was Mussolini a purist when he sought publication. Thus *The Cardinal's Mistress* appeared in the paper edited in Trento by Cesare Battisti, destined to be Italy's prime national “martyr” in the First World War, in

⁴² BMOO XXXIII, 8, 25.

⁴³ BMOO XXXIII, 41.

⁴⁴ A review of *The Cardinal's Mistress* published on the Odd Books website has elicited some defenses of it by residual Mussolini fans. See the comments posted on <https://oddbooks.co.uk/oddbooks/musso.html> (January 13, 2016).

1909–10 a radical of some sort but not an orthodox socialist. The same openness to non- or even antisocialist circles is evident in other of Mussolini's publishing ventures. In 1911, he published a hundred-page survey of the Trentino "as seen by a socialist." He did so through a Florence publisher close to *La Voce*,⁴⁵ a "literary weekly" edited by Giuseppe Prezzolini and now usually viewed as the key journal for non-Marxist intellectual critics of Italian liberalism, the great majority of whom (including Prezzolini) ended as fascists. *Il Trentino visto da un socialista* scarcely endorses the formal Marxist line that nationalism was false consciousness, at least implicitly arguing that ethnicity (and not class) is the major field of political disputation and opportunity in the South Tyrol. The Habsburg authorities, the author maintains, were engaged in a de facto "war" against local Italian culture. "Such a war may not inflict public massacre, but it is as continuous, violent, and passionate as any battle between armies." The Trentino, Mussolini added, should not be allowed to fall into "the tragic situation now existing in Trieste" and probably would not given that the region's proletariat and peasantry were both Italian and economically active, modern, and thus naturally tending to thrust north against their older and more defensive German enemies.⁴⁶

Yet, the nationalist heresy on Mussolini's part was incomplete. The tract ended with him noting that, given the Austrian government's hostility to serious modernization and industrialization of the region, *trentini* were finding their own respite in emigration. A linguistic appendix admitted that the local dialect was a "mixture of Ladin, Lombard, and Venetan," while "literary Italian" was scarcely a natural medium of exchange there. There was no reason to be too disconcerted, Mussolini concluded in what might seem solid internationalism, since all languages today are more or less spurious, although his final paragraph returned to patriotic themes as he advised sending free copies of such significant journals as *La Voce* to Trento in order to defend "the purity of the fatherland's idiom and overcome the danger of further dangerous [linguistic] corruption."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Casa Editrice Italiana di Attilio Quattrini. BMOO XXXIII, ix.

⁴⁶ BMOO XXXIII, 171–73.

⁴⁷ BMOO XXXIII, 211–13.

In any case, it was Mussolini who mattered to the aspirant writer as much as ideas, be they socialist or nationalist. Proof came over Christmas and New Year 1911–12, when, serving a sentence in Forlì jail for organizing a hostile demonstration against the imperial war which Italy was waging in what was becoming the colony of Libya, Mussolini settled down to write an autobiography. Not yet thirty (he had been born on 29 July 1883), Mussolini felt it worthwhile penning an account of “his brilliant career” (even if the work was not published until 1947). As he explained he had begun writing on the night of 2 December (the anniversary of the Battle of Austerlitz as he may have known, given his identification with Napoleonic destiny). Sounding almost as though he had foreseen the linguistic turn, Mussolini announced that his intent was “not to write for the curious. I write rather to rewrite myself,” by going back over his family childhood and his schooling (unhappy with the Salesians at Faenza, happier if still restless with V. Carducci at Forlimpopoli), times that he conventionally thought were his “best years.” “I am coming clean. Ecce Homo. I am putting back into order the canvas of my own destiny.”⁴⁸

He continued the story beyond 1901 and to his career as a teacher, emigrant to Switzerland and Trento, journalist and political activist, mixing his text between political pronouncement and evocations of his raunchy sex life. “I had a rather adventurous and tempestuous youth. I learned about good and evil in life. I constructed for myself a culture and a sound scientific knowledge. My stay abroad helped me to learn modern languages. I am still an uptight, jittery person, possessed of the temperament of a savage, scornful of popularity.” And then, switching to sex again, he concluded: “I have loved many women. But now is the moment to draw the grey veil of oblivion over these past loves. Now I love my Rachele, and she also loves me deeply.” “What,” he asked in banal coda, “will the future hold?”⁴⁹

The socialist Mussolini had one more book in him. Its field was not poetry, not a novel, not autobiography, not philosophy but instead history, religious history, a study of the proto-Czech, proto-Protestant, Jan Huss (1369–1415). Publishing in Rome in a series dedicated to “the martyrs of

⁴⁸ BMOO XXXIII, 217.

⁴⁹ BMOO XXXIII, 269. He had begun living with Rachele Guidi, the daughter of his father’s own partner. For the story, see Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 64–65.

free thought," Mussolini turned his ever-ready hand to a quickie, fifty-page, popular history (again with strident anticlerical, anti-Vatican, anties-establishment intent). The title was *Giovanni Huss il veridico* (Jan Huss, the truth teller).⁵⁰ The study had few pretensions of serious research. In his preface, Mussolini noted disarmingly that "the Bohemian heretic's Latin works were impossible to find in Italian libraries" and he did not number Czech among his languages. His bibliography was modestly restricted to four or five listed books and articles, plus "some lesser pieces."⁵¹ The content was therefore thin, with Huss portrayed as a virtuous enemy of a deeply corrupted church, a business venture "headquartered in Rome but with branches spread across Europe," devoted to material rather than spiritual gain. Monasteries were "garbage dumps for parasites, adoring the Lord with vicious sensual pleasures."⁵² Huss struggled nobly against such evil, marching head high to his martyrdom. Mussolini's narrative was hackneyed with the only hint of originality (or heresy from the socialist "church") being the enthusiasm expressed for a perceived "national" struggle between Czechs and Germans, fired when the Hussites united with the military chief, Jan Zizka, "hero of the Bohemian people."⁵³

By 1913, then, Mussolini had experimented with quite a few fields of verbal creative endeavor with some flair and success, if never of a sort that would suggest that he make writing his main career. Rather, the editor of *Avanti!* had proved that he was a fine journalist, as well as an able newspaper manager. Under his control, *Avanti!*'s sales multiplied and Mussolini ruthlessly sacked comrades on the paper whose performance he judged less than adequate. His writing, like his speaking, is interesting not so much for its own sake but because from 1919 Mussolini became the leader of the fascist movement that, only three and a half years later, took power in Rome. Given this future, three matters need underlining: the nature of

⁵⁰ See BMOO XXXIII, 272–327. As with the novel, after the Lateran pacts there was now also an English translation. Benito Mussolini, *John Huss* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1929). A new separate edition of the book was published in 1946 by Edinac with an editorial note underlining the betrayal of the book's ideas in the 1929 agreement with the Vatican.

⁵¹ BMOO XXXIII, 273.

⁵² BMOO XXXIII, 275.

⁵³ BMOO XXXIII, 304–II.

Mussolini's revolutionary socialism, the regular suggestions that, in contrast to internationalist theory, the future Duce had not purged himself of the perception that nationalism mattered, and, above all, the compelling evidence that here was a young man of intense and restless ambition, a provincial who saw himself as a hero, ideally lauded in Paris but, if that was not possible, in Milan or Rome. The word *Duce* was already being attached to the name Mussolini, even if it was not yet restricted to him. When world war began, Mussolini eagerly marshaled words as the force to unlock the place where, he believed, power resided. In his own mind, he knew he was a leader in waiting.

In October/November 1914 Mussolini broke with the Italian Socialist Party, abandoned the editorship of *Avanti!* and assumed the role of editor/owner of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, a prowar paper published in Milan and funded with the help of the French and British secret services, as well as by prominent Italian businessmen and mediators near the conservative liberal government. A course had opened that was to lead to fascism, dictatorship and the Italian version of totalitarianism as a sort of peacetime continuation of the wartime practice of politics and society, and reading of history. Along this track toward power and then in authority, Mussolini had little time for creative writing beyond that of his fertile journalism (and, after October 1922, he handed the editorship of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, elevated to be the regime's semi-official organ, to his younger brother, Arnaldo). The dictator was at pains to keep the chief fount of daily revolutionary words in the family.

Of Mussolini's more measured writings, the greatest publishing success was *Il mio diario di guerra (1915–1917)*, originally appearing in serial form in his newspaper, but after 1922 turned into the major gospel of Italy's allegedly glorious war. The work is of stylistic interest since it is now that Mussolini adopted the staccato phrasing that became his trademark as a speaking dictator and that implicitly promised a regime committed to industrialization, modernization, and the victory of the machine, Mussolini become almost a rhetorical futurist: "A night of torment. This morning either fog or snow. We worked intensely [on entrenchment]. The war of the agricultural laborer. The spade matters as much as the rifle."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ BMOO XXXIV, 57.

The diary thus became a key work in the construction of the “cult of the Duce,” the first and arguably the most lavish of all the personality cults lighting up the numerous dictators of interwar Europe, if one with a residual ambiguity since, within the Vatican, lived a Pope whose own “infallibility” had been made dogma in 1870. The presence in Italy of two infallible leaders naturally conditioned fascist totalitarianism.⁵⁵

Whether always right or not, Mussolini was now too busy for many literary divagations. Paving a path that would be followed by modern celebrities, Mussolini utilized ghostwriters for much of “his” work. The greatest success was an autobiography, originally appearing in the Philadelphia *Sunday Evening Post*, written by the faithful Arnaldo, with translation corrections into English made by the retired US ambassador to Rome, Richard Washburn Child.⁵⁶ It appeared in accessible paperback form and was translated into many other languages, although its greatest spread was in the English-speaking world.⁵⁷

More adventurous were three plays written by a long-lived and adaptable author and stage director (and, before 1914, Puccini’s lyricist for *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*), Giovacchino Forzano.⁵⁸ Entitled *Campo di maggio*, *Villafranca* and *Cesare*, the works were historical dramas reviewing the lives of Napoleon, Cavour, and Julius Caesar. Forzano drafted all the words between 1929 and 1932, although he did often consult Mussolini about their tenor. In that regard what might be thought a little surprising is therefore the pessimism of their evocation of leaders, elevated to grandeur, yet confronting final “defeat under the blows of incomprehension and betrayal.”⁵⁹ Here, it seems, was a dictator who, even in his pomp, never ceased to fear that events or other humans might rend him into a sawdust Caesar. The Mussolini who so braggingly hailed the tenth anni-

⁵⁵ For a case study, see R. J. B. Bosworth, “*L’Anno Santo* (Holy Year) in Fascist Italy, 1933–34,” *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010): 436–57.

⁵⁶ For his own autobiography, full of admiration for Mussolini and Fascism, see Richard Washburn Child, *A Diplomat Looks at Europe* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1925). Mussolini’s account of Arnaldo’s role as writer can be found at BMOO XXXIV, 184.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1928).

⁵⁸ For his memoirs, see Giovacchino Forzano, *Come li ho conosciuti* (Turin: Edizioni Radio, 1957).

⁵⁹ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 31–32; Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 196–97.

versary of his regime lacked the certainty of the real fanatic that his course must lead to triumph.

Psychologically of greater interest is Mussolini's *Vita di Arnaldo*, a fifty-page obituary for his brother, begun on Christmas night 1931, "perhaps the saddest of my life."⁶⁰ Late in the Second World War, in desperate times of national and ideological defeat and personal depression, Mussolini reinvoked his brother as "incorruptible,... serene, human," the only man whom he had ever really trusted.⁶¹ Fitting this line, the *Vita di Arnaldo* sentimentally reviewed the family life of the brothers, implicitly reminding readers that fascist totalitarianism had refrained from fracturing the family, the ultimate source of identity for many Italians (including the Duce). Arnaldo was praised as heroic soldier, able journalist, and author of romantic agrarian poetry. But above all the dictator recalled a man who had been his "other half," his subordinate other half, purposeful and obedient, the first and best "collaborator," following where the older brother led as birth order eternally demanded that a younger sibling should do: "A politician can nourish doubts about his most loyal colleague, he can even see himself denied by his son. But a brother is always sure."⁶²

Family loss was again the prompt to write, if with different themes and more doubtful sincerity, in Mussolini's *Parlo con Bruno*, published in November 1941, two months after the death of the Duce's second son. By most accounts, Mussolini was a distant father to his five legitimate children, in the 1920s left in Milan to the care of their mother, Rachele, and, in things that counted, their uncle, Arnaldo. In 1929, the Mussolinis moved to the Palazzo Torlonia, a grandiose and fake "historic" palace situated just outside the Porta Pia, the gate where, in September 1870, Italian troops stormed in to seize Rome for the nation. Before and after his marriage in 1938, Bruno sounds like a model dictator's son, less than brilliant academically (his father noted optimistically that he had always intended to take a degree at Rome university but never actually got there),⁶³ engrossed most

⁶⁰ BMOO XXXIV, 141.

⁶¹ Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 26.

⁶² BMOO XXXIV, 166–67.

⁶³ BMOO XXXIV, 255.

by boxing, golf, and fast cars, and predictably employed in wartime as a test pilot.⁶⁴

So *Parlo con Bruno* is more conventional than the *Vita di Arnaldo*, less convincing than hopeful in its initial claim that the whole Italian people mourned Bruno's death (included are ten pages of poems to the "hero," "spontaneously" composed by the "public").⁶⁵ Similarly, the work is unsurprising in its emphasis on Bruno's service in Ethiopia and after. The peroration is more rhetorical than heartfelt as Mussolini wrote: "All that I have done and shall do is as nothing compared with what you have done. One drop of blood that leaks from your lacerated temples and streams over your white face is worth more than all my works, past, present and future. That is so because only the sacrifice of blood is great. All the rest is ephemeral."⁶⁶ These perhaps are fascist sentiments and no doubt were meant to be. Yet their stoicism and characteristic pessimism are scarcely novel.

Mussolini's final writings were a self-interested account of his fall from office in July 1943, published in nineteen parts by the Milan paper, *Il Corriere della Sera* in June/July 1944 and brought together in August under the title *Storia di un anno: il tempo del bastone e della carota*, allegedly selling 300,000 copies.⁶⁷ In October, they were republished with the addition of a chapter entitled "Calvary and Resurrection," grandiloquent no doubt but scarcely original in still Catholic Italy.

Worthier of note were Mussolini's *Pensieri sardi e pontini* (Thoughts about life and politics), scribbled down while he was in prison between July and August 1943, and only brought to light after the dictator's death. They mix observations on present events with philosophizing about nature, religion, politics, and life, inconsistent in their attitude to fascism, its revolution, and the Italian people. "What a happy time it was," Mussolini recalled, ranging free, when "a pope, the representative of God on earth, called me 'man of Providence.'" "Of the so-called 'totalitarian states,' arisen since 1918, the Turkish one seems the strongest. In that country there is only one party, that of the people and its chief is the President of

⁶⁴ For further detail, see Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 249; 252–53.

⁶⁵ BMOO XXXIV, 257–68.

⁶⁶ BMOO XXXIV, 269.

⁶⁷ BMOO XXXIV, viii; 301–474.

the Republic.” “When a man falls along with his system, the fall is definitive, especially if the man is more than sixty.”

Here, then, were lucubration, half envious, half contradictory, half formed, always likely to drift into vanity and self-obsession. They reveal much about this Duce as given to working toward the Italians as placing them under total mental control. Throughout his dictatorship, Mussolini remained a man who cannot be pigeonholed as a crazed fundamentalist, the permanent foe of decent or liberal humankind. Rather, in his mixture of crimes and follies, short-term success and ultimate failure, lies and self-knowledge, ability and vanity, expressed in his writings as well as in his political actions, Benito Mussolini was an Italian of his time and place, a dictator of by no means limitless power. His life can still teach us about the complexity of the human condition and the thankful difficulty in achieving anything in total form.

Joseph Stalin (1878–1953)

“Over This Land” (1895)

Over this land, like a ghost
He roamed from door to door;
In his hands, he clutched a lute
And sweetly made it tinkle;
In his dreamy melodies,
Like a beam of sunlight,
You could sense truth itself
And heavenly love.
The voice made many a man's heart
Beat, that had been turned to stone;
It enlightened many a man's mind
Which had been cast into uttermost darkness.
But instead of glorification,
Wherever the harp was plucked,
The mob set before the outcast
A vessel filled with poison....
And they said to him: “Drink this, o accursed,
This is your appointed lot!
We do not want your truth
Nor these heavenly tunes of yours!”¹

¹ Joseph Stalin, “Over This Land,” in Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, 233.

Stalin's Writing: From the Romantic Poetry of the Future to the Socialist Realist Prose of the Past

EVGENY DOBRENKO

Revolution is an ABC for the people.
—Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*

I. POETIC PROLOGUE

In so far as biographers are willing to bring up Stalin's humble beginnings as a poet it is usually for the purpose of demonstrating that even in his early years the future dictator was characterized by romanticism and passion for almost Nietzschean fantasies.

The poems of the young Stalin drew the attention of the patriarch of Georgian literature and social thought, Ilia Chavchavadze, who decided to print them in his newspaper *Iveria* in 1895; and later the Georgian public figure Mikhail Kelendzeridze, who in his 1901 textbook on the theory of literature included a poem signed by Soselo (one of the first alias Iosif Dzhugashvili) as one of the best examples of Georgian classical literature. Six years later, Kelendzeridze compiled and published *The Georgian Anthology or a Compilation of the Best Examples of Georgian Literature*, a kind of Georgian ABC book in which he included Stalin's poem dedicated to the Georgian poet and playwright Prince Raphael Eristavi.

The poems of the young Stalin were typical of a student. They rehash the motifs of Georgian Romanticism, which was a very strong trend in Georgian literature. It was dominated by two principles—the rebellious, generally characteristic of the romantic poet, and the historic-nationalist. All Georgian romantics appealed to the “Golden Age” of Georgian history, seeing it as the lost ideal. All of this was superimposed on the sharp mood

swings of the rebellious author and restless hero. In one of the earliest of Stalin's published poems, "To the Moon," he sings the praises of the moon's pale light, which is meant to "dispel the gloom of a dense fog" and "illuminate the fatherland." At the same time, earth is depicted as "obscured by clouds," "dormant" yet majestic: Kazbek mountain ice that rises to the sky is a typical image of Georgian poetry. The poem is full of pretentiously romantic gestures, verging on the caricature: "But I shall undo my vest / And thrust out my chest to the moon, / With outstretched arms, I shall revere / The spreader of light upon the earth!" (85).² The main idea of the author was repeatedly quoted by biographers: "Know for certain that once / Struck down to the ground, an oppressed man / Strives again to reach the pure mountain, / When exalted by hope" (85).

Undoubtedly, this figure is the prophet—a figure symbolic not only in Georgian but also in Russian literature (it is sufficient to point to Pushkin and Lermontov). But if the prophet and the angel of the Russian classics were primarily performers of God's will, completely devoted to a higher calling, and romantically estranged from the profane material world, Stalin's prophet is purely tragic and at the same time devoid of any kind of religious dimensions. In the song of Stalin's prophet, instead of the divine will unveiling itself, something entirely different is revealed. In his "straightforward song," with which he walked from house to house, "You could sense truth itself / And heavenly love. / The voice made many a man's heart / Beat, that had been turned to stone; / It enlightened many a man's mind / Which had been cast into uttermost darkness" (233). However, he is only greeted with people's hatred: "The mob set before the outcast / A vessel filled with poison ... / And they said to him: 'Drink this, o accursed, / This is your appointed lot! / We do not want your truth / Nor these heavenly tunes of yours!'" (233). Stalin's tragic prophet is deprived of grace, but is strictly a literary character—this is above all a romantic hero. And most often, such a hero-prophet in poetry is the poet himself.

Romantic poetry always contains a strong element the author's self-image. In essence, Stalin's poems are meta-poetry. It is dedicated to ... poetry. In a poem dedicated to the well-known Georgian poet Prince

² Quotations from this and subsequent poems by Stalin are taken from Montefiore, *Young Stalin*.

Eristavi, Stalin describes him as either a theater-populist "singer," who is "moved to tears by the bitter lot of the peasant," and "placed at the head of the people's heads" (263). All this undoubtedly derivative imagery is imbued with a strong nationalistic spirit. When the poet was "elated, excited about the greatness of his country," his songs sounded "as if / Pouring down from the heavens / When, inspired by the homeland, / He touched the cherished strings," he "erected a monument to himself" "in the heart of every Georgian." The heroic feat of the poet is not fruitless: his "reward should be crowned" with nationwide fame and the ability to "cross the boundaries of centuries." However, it is here that the poet meets the destiny of the romantic prophet who has encountered the spiritually deprived crowd.

The tragedy of Stalin's hero is all-encompassing. It is not only the poet, the prophet, but also the old peasant farmer, Ninika, "broken by an evil grayness" and with his "powerful shoulders drooped" who "became a helpless hero." A strong young man, "He must have piled up mountains / Of sheaves side by side" (307). But now "he can no longer move his knees, / Scythed down by old age / He lies down or he dreams or he tells / His children's children of the past" (307). But when he hears emanating from the cornfields the song of free labor, "He drags himself out, trembling. / He takes a few steps on his shepherd's crook / And, when he catches sight of the lads, / He smiles with relief" (307). The strong heart of the helpless old man and the smile to the children—all these are just reminders of impending death. The fate of old Ninika is the tragic destiny of each one. But whatever the author might be talking about in the poem he never abandons the stylistic confines of literariness.

Young Stalin was a typical imitator, and his poems were real collection of clichés of European romanticism and Persian ornamentalism (Persian poetry, in general, has had a profound impact on Georgian poetry): the endless chanting of the brightness of the moon, illuminating "the earthly world," is followed by the "pale blueness" when "under a grove in the azure rings the warble of a nightingale." "Streams singing in the mountains" and "wind's gentle wings" are invariably contrasted with "the dark forest of the night" and the soul tormented by the "pitch-black darkness." Here the blessed and purified hope again and again awakens the heart with its powerful voice—"the poet's soul strives high into the air." The poet differs

from a rhymer by the self-conscious approach to his own writing. Pushkin's own self-irony, with which he overcame romanticism, openly defied audience reception (the famous "My reader expects the rhyme 'roses': / Take it then, since you're so eager!"), is absolutely foreign to Stalin's writing, which in his aesthetic development of the early twentieth century still resides in the nineteenth century.

The quintessence of this poetry is embodied in the poem, "Morning," which consists of two parts, with each one conveying the two fundamental predispositions of Stalin's writing—romantic metaphorism and moralistic-patriotic didacticism:

The rose's bud had blossomed out
Reaching out to touch the violet
The lily was waking up
And bending its head in the breeze

High in the clouds the lark
Was singing a chirruping hymn
While the joyful nightingale
With a gentle voice was saying—

"Be full of blossom, oh lovely land
Rejoice Iverians' country
And you oh Georgian, by studying
Bring joy to your motherland." (13)

It is sufficient to replace this bucolic landscape with an industrial one, the children with the pioneers, and the nightingale (of course, mellifluous, and therefore of little use to the Soviet literature) with a veteran of the revolution, and we get Soviet children's poetry.

The most noteworthy aspect of Stalin's poetic style is a reliance on tradition, bordering on slavish imitation, and a lack of a sense of proportion. It is obvious that the author does not in the least notice (and not even feel) the absolute kitsch of his texts. The complete lack of self-irony could easily be read as a lack of cultural refinement and an antimodernist disposition, which Stalin felt not only toward the artistic avant-garde but also for modernism in general (starting with the decadence and symbolism, and ending

with cosmopolitanism and style unconventionality). His reliance on traditional romanticism—in the entire range of its stylistic conventions: decorative prettiness, nationalism, heroic posture, etc.—will go on to be reproduced in socialist realism.

However, retrograde aesthetic takes an entirely different dimension when it comes to the aesthetics of political representation. What is fatal for poetry might be extremely productive in politics. Thus, in politics kitschy prettiness, no sense of proportion and stylistic conventionality turn into an absolute “sense of the masses”—the exact projection of mass tastes; reliance on nationalistic rhetoric and grandiloquence becomes a response to the uneasy agitation of the masses; romantic elation and heroic sublimates the masses’ elemental anxiety. The lack of self-irony is transformed into Stalin’s infamous black humor and his rare political cynicism. This romanticism, with its reliance on positive national and historical ideal, alien to cosmopolitan modernism, and with its exaggerated ardor, so alien to modernist rationalism, easily degenerates into historical determinism and logification. In short, this romantic poetry not only engendered socialist realism, but also gave birth to a political prose of Stalinism.

2. BREVITY IS THE SOUL OF WIT

The well-thumbed book of communism today lies open. Now, when one no longer has to live in it, it has become possible to read it.

Communism truly was a book. For literocentric Russian (and Soviet) culture, the “open book” is not a metaphor. The tradition conforms to the very nature of the Soviet political-aesthetic project, and is one of the things which marks it out from the other mega-project of the twentieth century—Nazism—which consisted, according to Valerii Podoroga in the fact that Hitler was “a man of the word” while Stalin was “a man of the letter.” The Stalinist regime’s communicative model, Podoroga explains,

acknowledges power as a kind of sacred text, which has recorded every word uttered about power, and is its own kind of proto-text of power, presented as mythical sacrament and first initiation. The selection and formation of the masses occurs through a procedure of the correct reading of the texts of

power.... The sacralization of the texts of power occurs through the sacralization of the representation of the leader as a unique sign of absolute power.... The spoken word disappears as a bearer of communicative attributes; the old party stratum of revolutionary orators, tribunes, and polemicists is destroyed. The revolutionary spirit of verbal action is translated into the framework of the sacred text of power, of which the leader acts simultaneously as interpreter-expert and founder.³

This is how the dual reality of the Stalinist era is produced: one side is invisible (the Gulag), while the other compensates for the disappearance of the first. This new reality magically shapes the relationship of the masses to the leader, “but if we throw off this ‘charm’ we will see nothing except the text of power devouring the reality of our everyday existence. There is no choice: either disappear, go off into the unseen land of the Gulag, or become one of the dead letters of the Stalinist text.”⁴

Here, however, a question arises: if the Stalinist text is so culturally important, how did this cultural model manage to function for a quarter of a century when there was in fact an acute shortage of these texts? As is well-known, Stalin wrote very little, and when toward the end of his life he was preparing his own collected works, it barely ran to sixteen volumes, where the little that had been created by him in over five decades of political activity was printed in huge letters (as if in a typeface for children). We should note that practically the entire collected works of Stalin consisted of “works” of the pre-Stalin era: in the 1930s the even then hardly noticeable stream almost completely dries up, and in the postwar decade it is almost confined to a single volume.

One could, of course, suggest that the rare appearance of Stalin’s texts served all the more to turn them into sacred objects. It was not a question, however, of what was written by Stalin, but of which texts were attributed to Stalin. The abundance of works by “the founders of Marxism-Leninism” was the result of the political struggle, whereas the modest weight of Stalin’s texts is the product of an era of grand style in a petrified utopia.

³ Valerii Podoroga, “‘Golos Vlasti’ i ‘pis’mo vlasti,’” in *Totalitarizm kak istoricheskii fenomen*, ed. Alexei Kara-Murza (Moscow: Filosofskoe obshchestvo SSSR, 1989), 109.

⁴ Ibid., 110–11.

Here there was, it goes without saying, a conscious choice. Politicians who have come into power write little. On the other hand, an enormous apparatus of speechwriters exists, to write for them (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin, and others also had this kind of apparatus). Consequently, the appearance of such texts is not the result of works produced by the leader but of the strategy of his actions and gestures.

Leaders wrote books. Stalin's collected works, however, consists of speeches, letters, notes—in a word, of peripheral (short!) genres. The leader's three books (which were, at least, definitely heavily edited by him) have never for all that been acknowledged as his books, but, ironically, are called "short." We have in mind the following: *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: A Short Sketch of His Life and Activities* (Lenin Vladimir Il'ich. Kratkii ocherk zhizni i deiatel'nosti), *Josef Vissarionovich Stalin: A Short Biography* (Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. Kratkaia biografia), and *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs). It is significant that the authorship of these texts is transparently hidden: from Nikita Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress we know, for example, that Stalin edited his own biography, inserting entire pages; we also know a great deal about the process of work on the *Short Course*.⁵

And after all, by whom, strictly speaking, were these books written? In the *Short Course* we are informed: "[Written] under the editorship of the Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party"; in the Lenin biography nothing is mentioned at all, and there is only a stamp denoting "The Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of the Central Committee of the Communist Party"; finally in the Stalin biography there are the surnames of half a dozen "compilers." Meanwhile, it is obvious that for there to be something to "edit" or "compile," this something must at least exist in the first place. Thus the problem of the proto-text cannot be disputed. Undoubtedly, it in fact belonged to Stalin (although not of course in the literal sense that he sat down and wrote page after page).

⁵ See: Nikolai Maslov, "Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)—entsiklopediia i ideologiia stalinizma i poststalinizma: 1938–1988 gg.," in *Sovetskaia istoriografiia*, ed. Iurii N. Afanas'ev (Moscow: RGGU, 1996), 240–73.

We know, for example, that Stalin's style is sharply distinctive. It is invariably formed out of certain constructions, turns of phrase, figures of speech, deductions, and "logic," which are characteristic of Stalin's texts. To be convinced of this, one only has to read any of his works. The texts we are examining here undoubtedly have an internal intertextuality. They are written in the same language—Stalin's, in a single stylistic key and differ only in terms of genre. To establish that these three "short" texts had been written by someone else, we would have to assume something entirely unbelievable: someone consciously wrote in the style of Stalin. This suggestion is also fantastic because Stalin wrote and dictated his own texts, very carefully selecting his words, figures, and turns of phrase. The reason for this is entirely prosaic. Trotsky explained it: "At the age of eleven Iosif entered the seminary. Here for the first time he became acquainted with the Russian language, which always remained for him a foreign, school language, mastered under the lash."⁶ And further: "Stalin spent a total of eight years in prison and exile, but the striking thing is that during all this time he did not manage to learn a single foreign language. In Baku prison he tried, it is true, to learn German, but he gave it up as a lost cause and switched to Esperanto, comforting himself with the idea that it was the language of the future. In the sphere of knowledge, especially linguistic, Stalin's mind, lacking agility, always sought the line of least resistance."⁷

We will distance ourselves from Trotsky's assessment: Stalin's mind, for all its "lack of agility," was sufficiently versatile and—the main point—aesthetically sensitive to the historical role which Stalin was fated to play in the postrevolutionary era, having removed the "agile" political minds of revolutionary orators such as Trotsky, together with their heads. This aesthetic flair also prompted Stalin to make a decision which at first glance seems strange: to avoid being named as the author of the three books basically written by him—the meta-texts of Soviet culture. But it is not a problem of authorship, but rather the problem of nomination which constructs the very event of the "leader's book": in the final analysis it is unimportant who wrote Brezhnev's memoirs; what is important is that they were published in his name; and it is unimportant whether Stalin wrote or

⁶ Lev Trotsky, *K istorii russkoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), 398.

⁷ Ibid., 402.

“inserted”; what is important is that all three books carry the indelible and instantly recognizable imprint of Stalin’s style, Stalin’s logic, “Stalin’s genius,” as was said then (it is worth, however, noting that after the war, the authorship of the *Short Course* was attributed to Stalin officially).

Stalin wrote neither theoretical books, nor political manifestos, nor works of political or economic research, nor memoirs. He wrote history. This writing of history was for him a part, and moreover a very important part, of the making of history itself. The “trilogy” is the major intellectual and literary memorial of the Stalinist era, “a clinically pure case of totalitarian consciousness.”⁸ In essence, Stalin was the creator of the Soviet language, codifying this consciousness. In this sense, the “short” historical works created by him are meta-texts for Soviet culture: they fix the Soviet chronotope, the plotlines of Soviet art, official and everyday language, and the mythology of the Soviet historical consciousness.

The real higher mission of Stalin’s books—the creation of a Soviet mythology—could be realized precisely in historical narratives, not strictly literary, scientific or theoretical ones. Only history allows the unification of a certain kind of knowledge with literature, imparting to literature the appearance of “an objective exposition of the past.” The mythologic potential, contained in the very nature of historical discourse, is inexhaustible. In the era of the critique of ideology it was understood as the true domain of mythology, which led Roland Barthes to assert: “The function of narrative is not to ‘represent,’ it is to constitute a spectacle.... Narrative does not show, does not imitate.... ‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; ‘what happens’ is language alone, the adventure of language.”⁹

Adventure is the plot. It is this that history gives to narrative, which is simultaneously the product of the narrativization of social experience. History in fact begins from the narrative procedure. It is above all a question of the fact that the very character of narrative is modeled as both a correlation between reality and invention in the historical narrative, and as a specific kind of prism in which, according to Hayden White’s definition,

⁸ Mikhail Glovin’skii, “‘Ne puskat’ proshlogo na samotek’: Kratkii kurs VKP(b) kak mificheskoe skazanie,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 22 (1996): 144.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Fontana Press, 1977), 124.

“the true” is identified with “the real.”¹⁰ This link, meanwhile, is in no way obvious. Undoubtedly, here we see the mechanism of the aestheticization of reality at work: “The value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arise out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.”¹¹ Here we are entering the realm of literature proper.

The “secondary reference” of Stalinist culture is represented by socialist realism. Stalin’s trilogy is constructed according to its models. In other words, the biographies of Lenin and Stalin and the *Short Course* can be understood not simply as works of socialist realism, but as its meta-texts. Stalin was *the* major Soviet writer. So that, it is worth noting, the fact that he turned his mind that “lacked agility” to the “sphere of linguistics” and “questions of language” toward the end of his life was in no way accidental. Here we in fact have the answer to the question of authorship. The socialist realist text has no author: “In Gorky’s *Mother*—the first work of socialist realism—there is no author. All later creators of works in this field of writing should be called ‘Gorky-2,’ ‘Gorky-3,’ ‘Gorky-20336.’... The author, as he whose individual experience gives birth to the connection between words and things, disappears.”¹² The author of the socialist realist text is power—specifically, Stalin. It is clear therefore that he undertook an attempt at demystification, which Soviet literature as a whole did not match, but which the literature of North Korea, for instance, has realized consistently: there literary works are anonymous, being attributed simply to “The Writers’ Union of Democratic Korea.”

Stalin revealed his writer’s talent in three fundamental genres of historical narrative. We will address them in ascending order of genre, rather than chronologically: biography—the most simple, insofar as the position of the biographer in relation to the other is the most natural; autobiogra-

¹⁰ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² Eduard Nadochii, “Druk, tovarishch i Bart. Neskol’ko predvaritel’nykh zamechaniĭ k voprosu o meste sotsialisticheskogo realizma v iskusstve XX veka,” *Daugava* 8 (1989): 115. See also Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Metafora vlasti: Literatura stalinskoi epokhi v istoricheskoi osveshchenii* (Munich: Sagner, 1993), 31–39.

phy—a more complex type of historical narrative, as the position of the other (the biographer) in relation to the self always requires aesthetic distancing; finally, history as such, which demands the position of the other not in relation to an individual personality but to the world as a whole, and possession of a certain integral, absolute knowledge of that world, is the highest level of historical genre.

3. “THE CREATOR OF LENINISM” (STALIN AS BIOGRAPHER)

The heyday of biographical genres arose in the era of capitalism with its cult of individualism and the person, and therefore the adaptation of biography to the collective ideology of Marxism presents certain difficulties. We shall bear in mind the fact that a single, in essence, artistic aim—the creation of the image of the leader—is revealed in the three historical books in different ways. In the Lenin biography it is realized in the material of the life of the other. Lenin’s “Life and Activities” (as the subtitle pronounces) here really are no more than material; they supply the story, i.e., fuel for the narrative.

And we are talking specifically about story, since plot here prevails over chronicle. The story (chronicle) of Lenin’s life—only to the extent to which it is represented in the biography—is true: dates of birth, death, congresses, journeys, and other such “events.” But a book equal in size to the *Short Course* cannot, it goes without saying, be made out of a chronicle. And it is not these events which make up its contents. It reads like an artistic biography. And if in reading it there is no aesthetic enjoyment, then it is only to the extent that reading a Soviet historical-revolutionary or industrial novel is similarly not an enjoyable experience (at least, not for everybody).

The genre sources of texts like the biographies of the leader and the *Short Course* are traditionally sought in the Holy Scriptures and hagiography.¹³ However, these reveal only plot and not stylistic dominants. Let us examine one of the first scenes from the Lenin biography. Lenin here is seventeen years old. He is being arrested for taking part in student unrest: “What are you rebelling for, young man? You’re facing a brick wall,” the

¹³ See Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Pisatel’ Stalin* (Moscow: NLO, 2001).

policeman who was accompanying Lenin to prison said to him. “That wall, it’s decaying—put your finger through it and it will fall down,” replied Lenin. In the prison the students, having once gathered together, began asking each other about what they would do when they were freed. When it was Lenin’s turn and he was asked, “What about you, Ulyanov, what are you thinking of doing next?” he replied that he had one path before him—the path of revolutionary struggle.¹⁴

We know that in descriptions of the actions of a leader psychological motivation is absent. But plot motivation is necessary. We have to ask ourselves a question: who related this story to the world, Lenin or the unnamed policeman (no third person was present)? Or, when did the students “once gather together,” if from the text it seems that Lenin was arrested in his apartment on the night of the 4 to 5 December, on the following day was expelled from university and a day later was sent to the village of Kokushkino? The “speeches” themselves are also revealing: can one imagine a seventeen-year-old youth declaring to his comrades that he was going to join “the path of revolutionary struggle”?

These questions, it seems, occur to the narrator as well. Therefore a mechanism is started up straight away by which they are neutralized. The scene is concluded with the passage: “Thus the seventeen-year-old Lenin received his revolutionary baptism in his first clash with the tsarist autocracy. From that point on Lenin gave his entire life without reservation to the cause of the struggle against autocracy and capitalism, the cause of liberating the workers from oppression and exploitation” (7–8). After “the path of revolutionary struggle,” the clash with autocracy does not seem excessively passionate. From the very first pages the reader is prepared for the fact that from his earliest childhood Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov’s business was not with people but with historical laws, institutions, and the state (no more or less than with the government itself). We only have to turn to the end of this chapter: “The tsarist government decided not to allow him to attend university” (13). The government! This for some reason conjures up a picture of a government meeting deciding to “not allow” him. And this is Lenin at twenty-five: “The tsarist government persistently followed

¹⁴ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Kratkii ocherk zhizni i deiatel’nosti* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1946), 7. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

Lenin's revolutionary activity. It saw in his person a very dangerous enemy" (34). Another five years pass, and Lenin is thirty: "Tsarism sensed in Lenin its most dangerous enemy" (51). From "very dangerous" Lenin has been transformed into "the most dangerous," and it is not "the government" but "tsarism" (that is, the political regime itself) which "sensed" that the main threat came from him. There is no need to say that in 1907 "tsarism wanted to make short work of the leader of the revolution" (105). Here, of course, there is an obvious aberration: Lenin could not in any sense become the "leader" of the first Russian revolution. But what can be said about the revolution of 1905–7, if in 1902, when he was thirty-two years old, "the name of Lenin became the banner for the struggle for the liberation of all the workers of mankind" (64)?

In whom did tsarism see its "most dangerous enemy"? At the age of twenty-three Lenin arrives in Petersburg and straight away this provincial youth does not simply become "the leader of the Petersburg social democrats" (20), but also realizes his "historical mission"—"the amalgamation of socialism with the workers' movement": "Immediately on his arrival in Petersburg, Lenin got down to solving this historical problem. He was only twenty-three years old then, but he was already a fully formed, superlatively educated revolutionary Marxist, selflessly devoted to the working class." Why at twenty-three was he already a "fully formed" man? Because it frees the text in advance from later references to any wrong steps or errors by the leader. What made him "selflessly devoted to the working class," which he, living at first in exile and then sitting his exams at Petersburg University, did not, and could not know? How did he manage at such an immature age not only to formulate for himself but also to "get down to solving this historical problem"?

These questions are inappropriate not because we are discussing a leader with superhuman potentialities but because their even being posed in the context of a socialist realist narrative is in principle incorrect. Historical narratives—biographies, autobiographies, histories—are, by necessity, realistic, and it is in this that they differ from literary narratives proper, in which the appeal to reality is not so obligatory (or is not obligatory at all). The reader's striving toward comparison is therefore natural. Meanwhile, such a comparison lies exclusively within the realm of chronicle (the story

of the narrative, the coincidence of dates, and so on) and does not take into account the character of the narrative.

Strictly speaking, the biography of a leader does not have a plot, insofar as it lacks any kind of development in the central figure whatsoever. Even the hero in the Soviet *Bildungsroman* goes down the famous route of coming into being, experiencing some sort of influences, and so on (Pavel Korchagin, Maresyev, or the young guards). With a leader nothing of the kind happens. He is fated to live a kind of ready-made life. It is as though his life has already been formed before the leader enters into it. This is why the narrative lacks all fascination. All that remains (not counting the story) is pure style, optics. These optics produce a life that has been lived *beforehand*. Whatever the leader does, everything is already laid out, following “the steps of history itself.” There is not, it seems, a single reference to Lenin’s work without accompanying epithets, which turn that work, so to speak, into something fated beforehand to a life in History: “The meeting accepted his *historic* ‘Theses on war’ [Tezisy o voine].... Lenin gave an answer of *genius* to all the fundamental questions posed by the era.... In this *historic* document Lenin issued a clarion call” (144–45); at twenty-seven Lenin “writes his *historic* brochure ‘The Goals of the Russian Social Democrats’ [Zadachi russkikh sotsial-demokratov]” (42); “Lenin’s articles are classic models of revolutionary publicism” (56); “In May 1901 in issue no. 4 of *Iskra*, Lenin’s *celebrated* article ‘Where to Begin?’ [S chego nachat’?] appeared” (56); thus “was created the *historic* book *What Is to be Done?* [Chto delat’?]” (64); “Lenin set to work on his *historic* book *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* [Shag vpered, dva shaga nazad], in which he gave a *skillful* analysis of the battle at the Second Congress” (75); the article “The Russian Social Democrats’ Agrarian Program” (Agrarnaia programma russkoi sotsial-demokratii) “is a *classic* commentary on the party’s agrarian program” (67) “Lenin gave a grounding of *genius* to Bolshevik tactics and a *brilliant* critique of Menshevik tactics in his *historic* book *Two Tactics of the Social Democrats in the Socialist Revolution* [Dve taktiki sotsial-demokratii v sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii]” (85); “In Lenin’s articles, published in the newspaper *Proletarii*, the party is given a *scholarly* Marxist analysis of the course of revolution, a *brilliant prediction* of its future development, *accurate and clear-cut* slogans, *exhaustive* directives and instructions” (89); “In his book of *genius*, *State and Revolution* [Gosudarstvo i

revoliutsiia], Lenin above all restored the authentic doctrines of Marx and Engels on the state" (184; emphasis mine throughout—E.D.). As we can see, Lenin did not write his articles and books, but apparently fulfilled what was prescribed for him by the laws of history. This "reading backward" generates the effect of a dead past. One could say that in these narratives there is no past at all—there is only history.

Whatever Lenin takes up—he does not have to seek anything—everything turns out to be "historic," "celebrated," "classic," full of "genius." In a word, ready-made. It is worth noting, however, that this optical effect is achieved not only with the help of epithets, but also by more complex means. Sometimes a kind of plot-preparation for events is included, a distinctive form of retardation: Lenin reports in a letter that he is working on some brochure or other, but "absorbed with editorial and organizational matters, Lenin could begin to work on the brochure only in the autumn of 1901. It came out in March 1902. This was Lenin's work of genius *What Is to Be Done?*" (57). Or a more refined artistic device: we are informed that Lenin is working on a book, then the book is described, and the points which make it so important are enumerated. The reader, of course, is intrigued and awaits the denouement. And then, finally: "In May 1909 the book was published. It was Lenin's work of genius *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* [Materializm i empiriokrititsizm]" (111), in which the leader "exposed to a detailed critique,... gave a remarkably profound account,... philosophically generalized,..." and so on (112). Not only the works themselves, but also individual formulations are accompanied by the indispensable epithets, such as: "Lenin's characterization of Stolypin's rule is a classic model of the application of the Marxist dialectical method to the analysis of social phenomena" (119).

Clearly, any action of the leader is fated to be significant and full of symbolism. Here is Lenin arriving abroad. We are not told, of course, what he lived on, whether he was doing anything other than party business, whether he experienced any kinds of difficulties. But a letter to his mother is quoted: "I've been very lazy about visiting the sites of Berlin: I am generally rather indifferent to them and most of the time come across them by accident. In fact I generally like hanging round at Sehenswürdigkeiten and entertainments more than visiting museums, theaters, arcades, etc." (37). And now we are given the conclusion: it turns out that having ended up after

Simbirsk, Kazan, Samara, and the village of Kokushkino at first in Europe and spending a month each in Switzerland, Paris, and Berlin, Lenin “carefully studied the workers’ movement, visited workers’ meetings, acquainted himself with the daily life of Western European workers” (30) (this is how the “hanging about” at “entertainments” was explained).

Lenin arrives in London. Here, of course, he does not live, but works: “Lenin carefully studied London—that citadel of contemporary capitalism. He became acquainted with the English workers’ movement, studied the life of the workers, their psychology, visited working-class areas, gatherings, meetings. He spent whole days at the British museum, where Marx worked in his time, creating his work of genius *Capital*” (66). As though Lenin came to London just in order to spend entire days where Marx wrote his *Capital* (a work of “genius,” of course). And what did Lenin manage to do in his two months in London (March–April 1902)? “With his characteristic thoroughness and conscientiousness, he carefully studied all the works of any importance in world literature on the agrarian question” (66). Later we learn that

from the first days of the war Lenin set about a detailed, profound study of world literature on economics, technology, history, geography, politics, diplomacy, the workers’ movement, the colonial question, and other spheres of social life in various countries in the imperialist era.... The world has given birth to few such indefatigable researchers, as crystal-clear in the human sciences, as Lenin. As a result of his colossal scholarly work, Lenin’s celebrated book *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism* [Imperializm, kak vysshaia stadiia kapitalizma] was created.... This book is the greatest work of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. (156)

Behind this hyperbole one should see not only the usual eulogy: it suggests that the narrator is a person who has never worked on or “studied” anything seriously, since it is obvious that in two months it is impossible “thoroughly,” “conscientiously,” and “carefully [to] study all the works of any importance in world literature on the agrarian question,” or to undertake “a detailed, profound study of world literature on economics, technology, history, geography, politics, diplomacy, the workers’ movement, the colonial question, and other spheres of social life in various countries in the imperialist era.” It is not important who the “narrator” is—he could

be any member of Stalin's Politburo—but biographically before us, of course, we have Stalin's narrative. It has his stylistic (optical) dimensions.

Above all, we must pay attention to the abundance of enumerative constructions: every action, every characteristic is multiplied through the use of synonyms, as though the narrator's reference book was a thesaurus. The second distinguishing feature of Stalin's narrative is the paranoid correctness of the speech, its rhetorical burden, the abundance of complex, overloaded syntactical constructions (a kind of parody of Gogol's style—and it is worth noting that for the Ukrainian Gogol, Russian was also an acquired language).

Having decided not to go beyond the bounds of the three books in our investigation, confirming their self-sufficiency, we will address only the citations by Stalin which are attributed in these books as authentic texts of the leader. One of them (from Stalin's speech at the preelection meeting of voters on 11 December 1937) concludes the Lenin biography. Here Stalin "sketched a lofty image of a political activist of the Lenin type" (297). "Sketched" is a very precise characteristic. Thus the people, said Stalin, must demand from their deputies:

that they put into post political figures of the Lenin type, that they are as clear and definite figures as Lenin was, that they are as fearless in battle and as merciless with enemies of the people as Lenin was, that they are free from any hysteria, from any hint of hysteria, when things start to get difficult and some kind of danger appears on the horizon, that they are as free from any hint of hysteria as Lenin was, that they are as wise and unhurried in resolving complex questions, when thorough understanding and thorough calculation of all the advantages and disadvantages are necessary, as Lenin was, that they are as truthful and honest as Lenin was, that they love their people, as Lenin did. (297)

Here we have the model of Stalin's narrative: *seven* repetitions of the construction ("that they are ... as was"). And this is the narrative of Stalin the biographer:

Lenin was not afraid of risks, for he knew, seeing with his clairvoyant glance, that the uprising was inevitable, that the uprising would triumph, that the uprising in Russia would pave the way for the end of the imperialist war, that the uprising in Russia would stir up the exhausted masses in the West, the

uprising in Russia would turn the imperialist war into a civil war, that the uprising would give Soviets to the Republic, that the Republic of Soviets would serve as the bulwark for the revolutionary movement of the whole world. (191)

The same seven repetitions of a single construction. Seven is not a random number, but the optimal figure for narratives of this type. In principle, the effect of the repetition is achieved after the third occurrence. A, say, five-fold repetition is perceived as a conscious rhetorical figure. A seven-fold repetition is a kind of “laying bare” of the device. After seven a tautological endlessness begins.

When telling of the peripeteias of Lenin’s life in emigration, of the impossibility of mixing with the masses, the biographical narrative achieves the heights of emotionality (within the bounds of the possible stylistic niceties for the given narrative, of course): “It was not easy for Lenin to live in emigration, cut off from direct contact with the working class, the people, the masses” (63). This is said as though it was “not easy” for Lenin to live cut off from his wife or family. “The people, the masses” act as substitutes for the family here. In the consciousness of the reader, this is how the drama is perceived: in terms of compensation. In this family setting, Lenin is perceived either as an all-knowing father (“Lenin was forced to live in emigration, but nobody in the party knew the situation in Russia, in the working class, as well as he” [63]); or as the solicitous head of the workers’ revolutionary family (“He often did not sleep at night, having received news of the arrest of one worker or another, of the failure of a committee or of the transport of literature, of the loss of the links that had been established with such difficulty with some organization” [62]); or as the favorite son (“But the party, itself moving in the underground, concealed its leader deep in the underground as well” [180]). Sometimes, however, the artistic means betray the narrator and the drama acquires the features of farce: “Lenin burst into Russia so as to participate directly in the revolutionary events. Like a lion in a cramped cage, Lenin rushed about” (169).

At the end of the biography, when Lenin the politician and Lenin the man are merged into the image of Lenin the leader, a conjunction of “monumentality” and “warmth” takes place. Not a single facet of Lenin’s

appearance is lost in his final portrait, but they are all transformed into familiar Stalinist “realism”: “Lenin possessed, like no one else, the feeling of the new. Like an experienced gardener, he carefully watched for the appearance of the new and lovingly cultivated it” (246); “Lenin was always on guard, he guessed the enemies’ plans in time, skillfully defined the basic direction of the opponent’s blows, quickly rebuilt forces, united the masses into an indestructible force and was victorious” (254); “Not tolerating sensation, demanding in everything simplicity and modesty, Lenin himself was a model of such exceptional modesty. The workers defined Lenin’s simplicity thus: ‘Simple as the truth’” (268); “It was impossible to deceive Lenin. He demanded straightforwardness and truth in everything” (269); “Lenin was the best friend of the young, father and educator to the young workers and peasants, and helped youth organizations with advice and instructions” (245).

In the political portrait of Lenin before us we have an undoubted self-portrait of Stalin.

Two dramas unfold before the reader of the Lenin biography. The first is the drama of *demarcation* (the struggle with enemies). The second is the drama of *amalgamation* (with his successor—Stalin). One could say that the entire plot of the Lenin biography develops between these poles of his identity. This schizophrenia is overcome purely artistically. What we have before us is precisely an artistic biography, the central figure of which (a certain historical Ulyanov/Lenin) plays a “ready-made” life (his historical role). We also have before us a genre paradox, which explains the nature of the character: *the more Lenin’s biography is actualized* (Lenin is important as a precursor of Stalin, therefore he is required to break off relations with Stalin’s future adversaries—who had been destroyed by the time the Lenin biography was published as “enemies of the people”—and on the contrary constantly merge with Stalin), *the more the biography turns out to be a given (ready-made), transforming it into a history played backward, a history without a past*. In other words, *the more topical Lenin’s biography (history) becomes, the more unnecessary his life itself (the past) becomes*. This optical focus constitutes the very essence of the Stalinist historical vision.

In the Lenin biography (as in Stalin’s other “short” narratives) there are no neutral figures who simply participate in events. The selection of

names present here has a strict axiological hierarchy. All the figures are divided into positive and negative. In this the positive pole is represented above all by the two leaders, while the negative consists of a whole throng of infernal villains of different stripes. All their "schismatic activity" demanded enormous efforts first from the Mensheviks, then from Trotsky and his "hidden agents." From this one can conclude, if nothing else, that Lenin's efforts in the battle with the "schismatics" were truly titanic. This struggle is the real plot of the Lenin biography, endowing the narrative at times with its own kind of "fascination." Thus the Second Party Congress is described in the thrilling tones of a football match report: someone is always seizing the initiative from someone else, opponents are shifting around the field, moving from one goal to another. Lenin is like Antaios (Stalin's favorite comparison): "The opportunists were celebrating, they imagined they had achieved a complete victory at the congress. The danger increased Lenin's energy tenfold" (71). We are now left with a question: *Why* are the enemies of Leninism carrying out all this activity? The Lenin biography not only fails to give any kind of intelligible answer to this apparently perfectly natural question, but does not even notice it.

It would seem that Marxism is strong at answering precisely such questions, by suggesting that "class interest" is concealed here. But the strange thing is that the narrator either deliberately evades obvious questions (and, in essence, ready-made answers), or knowingly gives oversimplified answers (such as: "The objective role of Machists was subservience to reaction and religious superstition" [114]). This leads one to doubt that we are reading a "Marxist narrative". Before us we have precisely a socialist realist text, and the familiar magic of socialist realist writing.

We should, however, bear in mind that historical events are here not so much independent elements with their own worth in the narrative, as proofs corroborating the correctness of the narrator's assessment with hindsight. In essence, we are faced with the same mechanism which is at work throughout the Lenin biography: the story is told prospectively, while the reader knows beforehand its "ready-made" result. Therefore, the villains perpetrate their villainy just as inevitably as Lenin writes his "celebrated," "classic," "famous" articles and books. "Famous," it seems, even before they were written.

For example, after signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk,

the Trotskyites and Bukharinites openly waged an unbridled campaign against Lenin, the party, the Soviet government. At the same time in the depths of the underground they jointly with the “left” Socialist Revolutionaries were preparing a counterrevolutionary conspiracy against the Soviet government. These scoundrels made it their aim to wreck the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, to overthrow the Soviet government, to arrest and kill Lenin, Stalin and Sverdlov. Only twenty years later did the vile plans of this human rubbish become known. (209)

In fact the “plans” of this “rubbish” are known to the reader *beforehand* and this familiarity of the reader with the “vile” character of party history is *foreseen* by the narrator, insofar as the cited text cannot be read by somebody who does not know *beforehand* that these people were “in reality” (twenty years later) Trotskyites or Bukharinites. This is the effect of the socialist realist novel, in which the reader knows beforehand who is the hero and who is the “scoundrel.” We should note that characteristics like this are applied to occurrences, but the people themselves who give their names to these “deviations” are deprived of any individuality. Thus in the Soviet encyclopedia of Stalin’s time one can find a definition of “Trotskyism” but not the name of Trotsky himself. And only the “short books” emotionally tell the story of the terrible facts. For example: “The reason for the Red Army’s retreat was Trotsky’s treacherous work, destroying the Southern front” (238), or: “The base traitor Kamenev proposed burning Lenin’s letter. The Central Committee rejected this proposal with indignation and accepted that of Comrade Stalin” (187). It is worth paying attention to the fact that the most unlikely events are falsified. Let’s say, if everyone knew that it was precisely Trotsky who was real hero of the Civil War, then it was precisely he (and not Rykov, for instance) who we are informed was a traitor. If we know that it was precisely Kamenev who was the trusted keeper of Lenin’s archive, then it is precisely to him (and not, say, Bukharin) that the attempt to destroy this archive is ascribed.

The issue here, as one may imagine, is that in the enormous Stalinist theater, accusations against Stalin’s opponents (the higher echelons of the party, the people who figured in the show trials of 1936–38) were dreamed up not by anonymous, bone-breaking investigators in the Lubyanka, but, as we know very well, in Stalin’s office. Nobody could have thought up on

Stalin's behalf all these improbable stories about his closest colleagues. This gives away the true artist in Stalin. Thus the "stories" told by them are not "brazen lies." Or at least, they are no bigger a lie, for example, than Laktionov's canvases, Pyryev's films, or Babayevsky's novels. With the difference only in that the characters in Stalin's stories were real historical figures.

Lenin appears in the biography as truly Stalinized. He is as perspicacious as Stalin ("Lenin angrily castigates the Mensheviks.... [H]e shows the inconsistency, the self-profiting cowardice of the liberal bourgeoisie, its treacherous behavior; not a single step by the liberals remained hidden from his penetrating glance" [89]); he is as consistent in his defense of ideological purity ideology ("Basely perverting and distorting Marxism, throwing out its revolutionary content, the opportunists attempted in this way to conceal their rejection of the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin was angered and indignant, seeing how unscrupulously the opportunists distorted Marxism. For the purity of revolutionary Marxism he was always prepared to fight to the end" [167]); he also sees the danger from both right and left ("He squashed the Mensheviks.... Simultaneously he directed the sharp sword of his criticism against the boycotters" [104]); he is just as merciless toward enemies of the revolution ("Lenin frequently had to wage war on these opportunists, blockheads, and intriguers, who subsequently turned out to be the most vile traitors and bandits. Great vigilance, great perspicacity was required so as not allow such elements to harm the socialist cause" [163]).

Lenin's battle with the "enemies" is described in literally the same words with which it would be described in Stalin's biography and the *Short Course*. It is the application of a sort of coup de grâce, unexpected and effective; a bone-breaking raw strength, sweeping away everything in its path. Thus, in 1912, "smashing all obstacles, destroying all enemies, pushing out of the way all who resisted him, Lenin achieved "a convocation of the party conference" (128); or, in 1917: "Kamenev, Rykov and others left the Central Committee and Sovnarkom. This flight from Sovnarkom by a pathetic band of cowards did not shake Lenin. The traitors and betrayers were thrown aside" (199).

Once everything proved to have been "smashed," "thrown aside," "routed," "swept away," history, finally, is depopulated. In the empty desert of this history the second act of Lenin's drama begins—his merging with Stalin.

The whole of Stalin's story under the title *The Biography of Lenin* relates to this.

Stalin appears for the first time in the biography of Lenin on page 23, when the story of Lenin writing the book *What "Friends of the People" Are* (Chto takoe druž'ia naroda) is related: "And in Tiflis, the young Stalin, having only just joined the revolutionary movement, also read it." Literally a page later in connection with another of Lenin's brochures, we are informed: "Comrade Stalin also became acquainted with this collection, and Lenin's article, signed K. Tulin, 'The Economic Content of Populism and the Critique of it in Struve's Book' (Ekonomicheskoe soderzhanie narodnichestvo i kritika ego v knige g. Struve) made a colossal impression on him" (25). This could, of course, raise a question: how did his impressions of this article become known? And what do the impressions of the twenty-year-old Stalin, unknown to anyone, have to do with the biography of Lenin anyway?

Such questions (if they occur to the reader) testify to the fact that this reader is not prepared for the reception of the Stalinist text. This text—to whatever it may be dedicated, questions of linguistics or problems of national economy—always has one and the same subject: power and its bearer—Stalin. This egocentric Stalinist narrative suggests a double reading. Something else is always being talked about. And this something is always the same. Accordingly, we can only look at Lenin through Stalin's projection.

Every fact in the Lenin biography (until the paths of the two leaders cross) becomes simply a reason to relate something about Stalin. Not only can such-and-such a book by Lenin become such a cause, but also a simple reference to the latest party slogan. For example, when Lenin joins the "struggle against Bogdanovism," in the first instance we are informed that "the Baku committee, led by Comrade Stalin, in August 1909 in its resolution called for a merciless ideological battle with Bogdanov and his supporters and declared this battle one of the immediate tasks of party work" (122). If there is no suitable work of Lenin's, then some fragment from a letter by the leader is found: "Accurate blows at Menshevism, aimed by Stalin, gained warm approval from Lenin" (89). Letters in general play an exceptional role in relations between the two leaders, when their acquaintance had not yet been formed:

Very many of the local workers gave Lenin letters in reply.... In them he derived strength for the struggle. A deep impression was made on Lenin by a letter he received from Stalin via his friends. Stalin fully supported Lenin, seeing in him the creator and leader of the party. Lenin replied to Stalin with a letter.... Thus at a difficult moment for the party there occurs by correspondence the acquaintance of the two great men of the present day—Lenin and Stalin. (74)

If, in the last resort, the necessary letters are not found, gaps in the “constant relationship” are filled by certain general remarks, such as: “Lenin carefully studied the experience of the work of the Caucasian party organization, created and led by Stalin. He presented them as a model of proletarian internationalism” (140).

Clearly, the historical meeting of the two leaders removed many of the plot complications in the account of this “history,” which could now flow the course of a normal, story-driven narrative. One of the basic lines to which this is reduced is the idea that Stalin was Lenin’s deputy:

Lenin led the congress from the underground through his comrades in arms—Stalin, Sverdlov, Molotov, Ordzhonikidze. He outlined his theses according to the fundamental questions of the congress. The immediate leader of the congress was Comrade Stalin. In his reports Comrade Stalin precisely, in Leninist style, formulated the tasks and tactics of the party’s struggle at the new stage of the revolution. (182)

Since the biography of Lenin gives no factual indication of Stalin’s role, the purely bureaucratic principle of explaining events, so beloved of Stalin, and known to the reader at the end of the 1930s, but absent from the party during Lenin’s life, comes into use.

For example, “at Lenin’s suggestion the Party Center for leading the uprising was elected with Comrade Stalin at its head. This Party Center was the guiding nucleus of the Military-Revolutionary Committee at the Petrograd Soviet and led practically the entire uprising” (191). “The Center ... of the Committee ... at the Soviet,” at the head of which stood Stalin, automatically (formally) turns him into the key figure in the October Revolution: “The Party Center directly controlled all the preparations for the

uprising, concentrating all its threads in its hands. Lenin at this time found himself in an illegal position (i.e., "underground") (192). It is easy to conclude that Lenin was not in a position to lead the uprising himself, and that from a purely bureaucratic point of view, it was led by Stalin.

Of course, "Comrade Stalin set forth a concrete plan for the uprising, worked out by him on the basis of Lenin's instructions. Lenin approved this plan" (191). This, however, is how Lenin personally appears at "revolutionary headquarters": "Late in the evening Lenin was called by the Central Committee at the insistence of Stalin to Smolny for general guidance of the uprising. Comrade Stalin briefed Lenin in detail when he arrived at Smolny of the measures taken and the course of the uprising that had begun. There and then, the plan to seize the winter palace was confirmed" (193). As we can see, he "was called" by Stalin for "general guidance" of the "uprising that had [already] begun," after "measures" had already been taken.

It goes without saying that "Lenin displayed exceptional concern for Comrade Stalin.... Lenin displayed attention to the conditions in which Comrade Stalin was living" (275, 276). Here the text of some notes of Lenin's to his secretary are introduced, about what Lenin had to discuss with Stalin, but he asks that they be given to Stalin only after he has got up and under no circumstances to wake him. In response to this concern, Stalin, of course, saved Lenin more than once. In the July Days of 1917, "Stalin performed a particularly great service in preserving the life of Lenin." Lenin was lodging in Alliluyev's apartment, in the same room in which later, from August to October 1917, Stalin lived. But it was not safe there ... Comrade Stalin took Lenin across to another worker at Rasliv Station.... When toward the end of August a cold spell began, Comrade Stalin organized Lenin's move to Finland" (181). And although from the text it is apparent only that Lenin staying for a short time in a room where Stalin later lived, this is quite enough to show the "particularly great role" Stalin played in "preserving Lenin's life."

Usually Stalin's role is emphasized as if "imperceptibly," with some kind of subordinate syntactic construction or a gerund phrase: "During his illness Lenin was often visited by Stalin, who was directing party work" (297). Or: "The congress undertook for its basic project the program worked out by Lenin and chose for the completion of this new program a commission consisting of Lenin, Stalin and others" (210).

Who these others are we are of course not informed. Depopulated history is transformed into a kind of hollow framework, into which any figures can be accommodated. For instance, “in April 1920 the Bolshevik Party marked the fiftieth birthday of its leader and founder, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin). The party organized by the Moscow committee on 23 April was attended by Lenin’s closest comrades in arms and friends, Stalin, Gorky, and others” (249). Here, of course, who the others are is unimportant. However, on another occasion the presence of “others” creates its own kind of optical illusion: “Lenin took decisive measures to reinforce the headquarters of the revolution—the Central Committee. Steadfast and experienced Bolsheviks were chosen to serve on the Central Committee: Lenin, Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kalinin, Dzerzhinsky, Ordzhonikidze, Frunze, Kirov, Kuybyshev, and others” (260). This collection (or more precisely, selection; there were in fact up to a hundred people on the Central Committee) of names is noteworthy: before us we apparently have Stalin’s Politburo, chosen by ... Lenin.

A special microplot in the biography of Lenin is the role of Stalin in the Civil War. This plotline required particularly careful attention. It was essential, in the first place, to show that in the war Stalin was also second only to Lenin. Therefore the story of the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk looks like this:

Lenin planned every step in the struggle for peace in consultation with Stalin. Lenin and Stalin jointly worked out directives for the Soviet delegation at Brest. When the delegation inquired of Lenin for further directives, he replied, “Stalin is not here yet, so I haven’t been able to show it to him.... I would like to consult with Stalin first, before I reply to your question.” A little later Lenin informed the delegation: “Now Stalin has arrived, I will discuss it with him and we will give you our joint reply.” The directive to sign the treaty was sent to Brest with the signatures of Lenin and Stalin. (205)

And although it is unclear what Lenin wanted to discuss with Stalin, precisely what “question” we are talking about, the very introduction of some everyday moments of discussion with the delegation serves as weighty evidence of Stalin’s role in saving the country from German intervention. Here a particular optical mechanism is at work. When the relationship be-

tween the two leaders is at issue, certain details and mini-testimonies (fragments from letters or transcripts of conversations and so on) come into play. No one else in the Lenin biography can count on such attention.

Secondly, the new history of the Civil War had to show Stalin as an active military commander. Thus we learn of Stalin's constant appearance at the most critical points of the military action:

No White Guard conspiracy would have saved Yudenich. All Stalin's proposals for reinforcing the rear, routing the nest of spies, and organizing the front, were supported by Lenin. Comrade Stalin quickly created a turning point at the front and at the rear. Under his leadership the Red Army with the support of the Petrograd workers and the Red Navy routed Yudenich's army. Then the party charged to the care of Comrade Stalin the Western front to organize the repulsion of the attack by the White Poles. (236)

The Central Committee directed Stalin, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze, Budyonny to the Southern front to organize the rout of Denikin. Trotsky was dismissed from the leadership of the Southern front. Instead of Trotsky's criminal plan.... Comrade Stalin proposed his own plan to defeat Denikin.... Lenin approved this plan and commanded Headquarters to put Stalin's plan into effect. (239)

Thirdly, as with all Stalin's "histories," this was expropriated history, and it was therefore necessary to show the treacherous role of Trotsky, when mention of his name could not be avoided. Stalin's instrumental mind suggested to him a device which operates in all three books: nowhere are Trotsky's official titles indicated, although he was in effect second-in-command in the party hierarchy during the Civil War. Therefore, we do not find a single indication of the fact that Trotsky was chair of the Revolutionary Military Soviet, but read everywhere that directives came from Lenin and Stalin. Stalin turns out to be Trotsky's commander:

[W]hen the impudent German brigands and Ukrainian White Guards attempted to advance over the borders of the Ukraine, Lenin gave instructions to the People's Commissariat for military affairs to "take without delay all necessary measures for the defense of the Eastern border of Kharkiv Oblast." Concrete instructions were developed by Comrade Stalin. "Details to discuss with Stalin," Lenin indicated in his orders to the war commissariat. (215)

A characteristic trait: to the commissariat—not a person (Trotsky), but an institution.

This same instrumental principle is also at work when there is no factual basis for recognition of Stalin's role in the Civil War. In such cases we are informed (as in the case of the October Revolution): "To mobilize all resources in defense of the country the Soviet of workers' and peasants' defense was formed. At its head stood Lenin. His acting deputy was Stalin" (223). What "acting deputy" means in the context of the first years of the revolution is not entirely clear, as party hierarchies were not then strict and formal distinctions did not exist.

In situations like this, indications of Stalin's role in events is created sometimes exclusively by stylistic means. For example: "The Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, headed in this period directly by Comrade Stalin, appealed to the workers, soldiers, and sailors to defend the revolution. Kornilov was routed" (186). The laconic ending of this construction ("Kornilov was routed") makes more prominent the preceding syntactic constructions. This device is repeated in Stalin's texts many times; the stylistic construct creates the appearance of cause and effect.

Lenin's actions are consistently rewritten by Stalin according to his own code of behavior. Lenin is not only, like Stalin himself, constantly giving "directives" and "instructions," but also literally utters Stalin's quotations ("Lenin taught the workers at *Iskra* never to ignore the small things at work, for it from the small things that great things are made" [61]). Insofar as this biography was created in the light of an already completed history, in Lenin's actions, those moments which are important for Stalin as having a "strategic character" are particularly singled out, above all the moment of foresight ("With his genius for intuition, Lenin foresaw the further course of the development of the revolution" [91]). Indeed, Stalin was just such a prophet. In the context of this prophetic strategy, the military disasters of 1941–42 were explained, for example, as "Stalin's plan of genius for organized retreat," and therefore the lessons "in the art of retreat" were ascribed to Lenin:

Lenin and Stalin, skillfully maneuvering, did not permit premature battle in unfavorable conditions, did not let the bourgeoisie crush the workers' and peasants' movement. (180)

In 1905, Lenin taught the party the art of revolutionary attack, and now he is teaching it how to retreat in correct and organized fashion, so as, having gathered strength, once more to shift to an even mightier attack. (102)

The Bolsheviks under Lenin's leadership retreated, retreated in organized manner, in complete order, crushing all who attempted to turn this retreat into a panicked flight. (131)

The biography of Lenin achieves its apotheosis in Stalin's "oath." Stalin's speech at the funeral meeting at the congress of Soviets on the occasion of Lenin's demise is described thus: "It is hard to put into words the intense attention with which the congress listened to Stalin's speech.... Comrade Stalin's speech was exceptional in its power. Stalin gave a great oath in the name of the party" (291–92). The celebrated "oath" consisted of a six-fold repetition: "Leaving us, Comrade Lenin bequeaths us.... We swear to you, Comrade Lenin, that we...." The text of Stalin's oath is marked out in the Lenin biography in a special typeface, but also has added to it a series of separate "statements": "Stalin—Lenin's faithful pupil and battlefield comrade-in-arms—is continuing Lenin's immortal cause" (292–93); "Lenin is the creator of Leninism.... Lenin's teachings are a beacon, lighting the way for the triumphant struggle of the working classes for their liberation ... Comrade Stalin gave the classic definition of Leninism: 'Leninism is Marxism for the era of imperialism and the proletarian revolution. More precisely, Leninism is the theory and tactics of the proletarian revolution in general, the theory and tactics of the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular'" (296). The latter "statement" could serve as an exemplar of Stalin's style. It is not only a question of constructions like "Lenin is the creator of Leninism," but of the very formulation of Stalin's "classic definition of Leninism" with all its "clarifying constructions": "More precisely ... in general ... in particular."

The biographies of Lenin and Stalin are locked together in the *Short Course*—the story of their meeting. For now we will but note: it is not propaganda, ideological or other aims of the author which define the nature of the narrative in Stalin's texts; these aims were only secondary. The main function of the book *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: A Short Sketch of His Life and Activities* is connected to the legitimization of Stalin's power. In the absence of this text the chain of the three books could not have been fixed

together into a harmonious mythology of Soviet history. The radical transformation of biography, which we are considering here, could be the result only of a colossal *artistic* effort, which allows us to speak not so much of the “aestheticization of politics” as of the *aesthetic* nature of Soviet political (including historical) discourse.

4. “THE MASTER OF THE REVOLUTION” (STALIN AS AUTOBIOGRAPHER)

A well-trodden road stands before us. Stalin’s three books are a three-fold repetition of a story. The same story. Different genres. The biography of Lenin was not simply a foreword to the biography of Stalin. Stalin as autobiographer was a phenomenon which in its own way is exceptional.

If the state monopoly of Lenin’s biography, established in the 1930s, in effect made other (non-Stalinist) interpretations impossible, then no official monopoly over the biography of Stalin was ever, as we know, established. While he was alive, his biography could only belong to Stalin himself. Therefore, Stalin could not have a biographer. His biography could only be an autobiography. At the same time, it could never be turned into an autobiography as such. We are again confronted with the anonymity of the text, but on this occasion the situation proves both clearer (we know exactly what Stalin inserted into his own biography) and more complex. Its complexity relates to its genre.

Since all three books are anonymous, one could conclude that Stalin never talked about himself. However, it is clear, in fact, that he always and only talked about himself. The Lenin biography is the most anonymous text, and the most transparent. Here Stalin could talk about himself in the third person without confusion. He was used to the existence of two identities. This split personality was described more than once by witnesses. There was, for example, the famous scene of his explanation to his son, whose wild outbursts were the subject of rumors throughout Moscow at the end of the 1940s. Stalin lectured Vasily threateningly: “You’re disgracing the name of Stalin. Do you think that you are Stalin? Maybe you

think that I am Stalin? *That* is Stalin,” he said, pointing to his official portrait which decorated the leader’s study.

This kind of internal duality was also observed in Stalin’s public performances. A quotation from his speech to the voters in December 1937 is inserted into his biography: “For my part, I would like to assure you, comrades, that you can boldly rely on Comrade Stalin. You can count on the fact that Comrade Stalin knows how to fulfill his duty before the people, before the working class, before the peasants, before the intelligentsia.”

In his speech unmasking Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev told the story of how Stalin inserted the following paragraph into his own “Short biography”: “fulfilling in masterly fashion the mission of the leader of the party and the people and having the full support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin, however, did not tolerate even a hint of self-importance, conceit, or pride.”¹⁵

The “biography of Stalin” is one of the most enigmatic literary and political memorials of the Soviet era. Its text is a true godsend for psychoanalysts. Stalin, as we know, did not favor doctors, and for that reason had his own means of therapy. The authorial impulse breaks through the borders of all “propriety” (it is not a question of trustworthiness); all sense of proportion disappears and the boasting at times achieves a completely grotesque form, turning into rank Khlestakovism. And this was another reason for the text’s anonymity: Stalin could not acknowledge it for, according to his own assertion, he would “not tolerate even a hint of self-importance, conceit, or pride” (Stalin’s modesty, however, stretched to admitting that during Lenin’s illness, “the fundamental work of leading the party had to be undertaken by Stalin” (89)—that “had to,” of course, was the model of Stalinist modesty); but nobody else would have been sufficiently authoritative to put his name to this sacred text. For this reason this biography, too, has no author, and there are only the “compilers” from the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute. Such a situation created unlimited possibilities for Stalin’s modesty to be realized.

¹⁵ Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Doklad na zakrytom zasedanii XX s'ezda KPSS* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo polit. lit-ry, 1959), 49–50. The quotations are taken by Khrushchev from the following edition: Georgii F. Aleksandrov, *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. Kratkaia biografiia* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1947), 105, 240, 231, 232. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

Stalin was undoubtedly a traumatized man. This trauma was intensified during the struggle for power; when this began after Lenin's death, Stalin, by general admission, had very little going in his favor: he was neither an orator nor a theoretician, and he had in no way particularly distinguished himself either before the revolution, during it, or in the years of the Civil War. This is precisely the source of the hypertrophy of "services" and the implausible way they are piled up, at which Khrushchev poked fun. The struggle for power had passed, but Stalin could not leave it there. He wrote his own biography, thinking up more and more new "facts," adding all the more superlative epithets, until his biography was turned into a hollow frame which he could fill as he wished. It was turned into a story suitable for any plot. There remained only the "scaffolding"—exiles, escapes, participation in this or that event, and so on. All the rest was invented with truly Gogolian imagination.

Stalin, being a bad tribune, undoubtedly, had a writing style, but it was the "oratorical" style of a bureaucratic rhetorician. In it he invested his artistic fantasies. He was compensating with his books for his absence from the revolutionary tribunes. Stalin's texts offered nothing new beyond this clearly distinctive style. Even the "self-glorification" was not Stalin's invention. It unarguably belonged to his chief rival, Trotsky. One could not find in the military statutes of a single army the world over what Trotsky thought up in 1922. In paragraph 41 of the political statutes of the Red Army there was his political biography, in which Trotsky appeared as the hero, personifying revolutionary and military valor. The paragraph concludes with the words: "Comrade Trotsky is the leader and organizer of the Red Army. Standing at the head of the Red Army, Comrade Trotsky is leading it to victory over all the enemies of the Soviet Republic."¹⁶ Stalin only had to change the name, and did not even alter the word order.

If Lenin's biography had to be rewritten, then Stalin's had to be written. And here we can agree with Stalin's assessment: he "fulfill[ed] in masterly fashion the mission of the leader of the party and the people." "In masterly fashion" (*masterski*) had many meanings for Stalin. He valued skill and mastery (*masterstvo*) above all else (remember his telephone conversa-

¹⁶ Cited in Nikolai A. Vasetskii, "L. D. Trotskii. Politicheskii portret," in *K istorii russkoi revoliutsii*, ed. Lev D. Trotsky (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), 34.

tion with Pasternak about Mandelstam: "But he is a master?"). Therefore, when Stalin describes himself as a "master" ("Under Lenin's leadership, I became one of the masters of the revolution" [61]) it should be taken quite seriously. He gave "the party and the people"—as their true leader—his own image.

If the Lenin biography was in some way at least connected with real events, then in the Stalin biography this link with reality is lost. For example, the very appearance of Stalin comes not out of the fact of his birth but from the play of historical forces. Stalin is the pure product of the laws of history. At the beginning we are informed that, "'the Union for the Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class,' created and led by Lenin, gave a mighty spur to the development of the social democratic movement across the entire country" (6), that "waves of the workers' movement reached as far as Transcaucasia, where capitalism had already penetrated" (6), that "the development of trade capitalism was accompanied by the growth of the workers' movement" (7), that "in Transcaucasia Marxist propaganda began" (7). Thereafter the "master plan" is replaced by an image of the Tiflis Orthodox seminary where Stalin studied. It turns out that it "was at this point a hotbed for every kind of liberating ideas amongst the young, as much popular-nationalistic as Marxist-internationalistic; it was full of various secret circles" (7). And it turns out that "the Jesuitical regime prevailing at the seminary aroused energetic protest in Stalin, nourished and strengthened a revolutionary mood in him. The fifteen-year-old Stalin became a revolutionary." The denouement, as always (remember: "Kornilov was routed"), ensues swiftly.

Stalin is raised above reality to the extent that even referring to any biographical facts becomes superfluous. Strictly speaking, Stalin does nothing independently. The Lenin biography is present as a kind of proto-text. Stalin was accomplishing in the Caucasus literally what Lenin was doing in the capital: he "united socialism with the workers' movement" in the Caucasus, "in exactly the same way as had been brilliantly achieved over several years before this by the Petersburg 'Union for the Struggle,' led by Lenin" (15); he created the newspaper *Brdzola*, which "was the best Marxist newspaper in Russia after *Iskra*" (16).

Of course, just as with Lenin, "tsarism sensed that in the person of Stalin they were dealing with the most outstanding revolutionary figure, and tried

in every possible way to deprive Stalin of the possibility of carrying out his revolutionary work” (43–44). But if in the Lenin biography such assessments are accompanied by some sort of facts (the significance of which was, of course, distinctly exaggerated), in the case of Stalin there are no such references at all. We are simply informed “the tsarist *oprichniki* do not manage to install Stalin in a new place of exile, as he again escapes, and once more ‘at liberty’ forges the revolutionary energy of the masses” (44). How exactly did this “forging” take place? Through his fantastic activity, as a result of which Baku, “the most important center of the workers’ movement in Russia ... was transformed into a citadel of Bolshevism” (44–46).

Moreover, his activity is as unfeasibly fruitful as Lenin’s (as we will recall, Lenin read practically the entire contents of the British Library in the space of two months). The extensive nature of the work done by Stalin differs only that in Lenin wrote, while Stalin acted. For instance, in Batumi in the space of four months (from the end of November 1901 to the beginning of March 1902) Stalin,

displays feverish revolutionary work: he establishes links with the vanguard of workers, creates social democratic circles, personally runs a series of party cells, sets up an illegal printing press, writes ardent leaflets, prints and distributes them, leads the workers’ struggle at the Rothschild and Mantashev factories, organizes revolutionary propaganda in villages. Stalin creates in Batumi a social democratic organization, founds the Batumi committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, leads strikes at factories.... Stalin is indefatigable: he systematically travels around the Transcaucasian regions (Batumi, Chiatura, Kutaisi, Tiflis, Baku, the peasant regions of western Georgia), reinforces old and creates new party organizations; participates in the bitter skirmishes with the Mensheviks ... energetically defends the Bolshevik position. (18, 22)

It is clear that “the workers of Batumi at that time called him the workers’ teacher” (18).

The final stroke in this fantastic picture can serve as a description of Stalin’s activity in Petersburg:

On 6 September 1911, Comrade Stalin illegally leaves Vologda for Petersburg. In Petersburg Comrade Stalin establishes links with the Petersburg party

organization; directs and organizes the struggle against the liquidators—the Mensheviks and Trotskyites; unites and strengthens the Petersburg Bolshevik organizations. On 9 September 1911 Comrade Stalin was arrested in Petersburg and sent back to Vologda Oblast. (48–49)

If we exclude the day of his arrival (7 September) and the day of his arrest (9 September), it turns out that all this titanic work was accomplished in a single (!) day.

After this we should not of course be surprised to learn that “*Pravda* was founded in accordance with Lenin’s directive, on Stalin’s initiative” (51), that “Stalin was the organizer and initiator of all the Bolshevik publications in the Caucasus” (23), or that the newspaper *Proletariatis Brdzola* “as after Lenin’s Central Party Organ *Proletarii* the best and most prominent Bolshevik newspaper” (25). In it “Stalin acts as a talented polemicist, the outstanding literary and theoretical force of the party, the political leader of the proletariat, the true follower of Lenin” (25). This passage concludes in quite fantastic manner (as it had begun): “Lenin spoke with admiration of *Proletariatis Brdzola*, its Marxist consistency, its superlative literary qualities” (25). Lenin did all this without knowing any Georgian.

We, of course, have before us a deception. But establishing this trivial fact does not in the slightest advance our understanding of the nature of Stalinist narrative. The lie here is so obvious that it seems as if the narrator is in no way hiding the “fictive” nature of the text. We are dealing precisely with an artistic text, which it would be useless to approach from the point of view of truth or fabrication.

Only by bearing in mind this aspect of the matter can we understand Stalin’s favorite story about the Civil War. This was one of Stalin’s main traumas: it was the finest hour of his chief adversary, Trotsky, and the time of Stalin’s own humiliation and failure. Therefore, the information raining down on the reader takes on the character of an avalanche:

Everywhere on the front where the fate of the revolution was being decided, the party sent Stalin. He was the creator of their important strategic plans. Stalin led the decisive military operations. At Zarizyn and Perm, at Petrograd and against Denikin, in the West against the Polish nobles and in the South against Wrangel—everywhere the iron will and strategic genius of Stalin

guaranteed the victory of the revolution. Stalin was the tutor and leader of the military commissars, without whom, according to Lenin, the Red Army would not have existed. The most glorious victories of our Red Army are linked with the name of Stalin. (82–83)

Whatever Stalin's story relates to (and it relates literally to everything, insofar as the leader's actions are not only maximally intensive but also totally extensive), it returns to the point of departure: the figure of the narrator himself. This peculiarity of autobiographical narrative allows us to examine the Stalin biography as one of the most fantastic model of the autobiographical genre. The events being described here which never took place compel us to suppose that the aim of the text was not at all a story about the life of Stalin, but an attempt to construct a kind of new historical reality, in which what is important is not the events as such, but their producer—Stalin.

If Stalin was People's commissar for nationalities, he

directly led all the work of the party and Soviet power in relation to solving the national question in the USSR.... There was not a single Soviet republic in the organization of which Stalin did not take an active and leading part. Stalin leads the battle for the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, directs the creation of the Belorussian Soviet Republic and the Soviet Republics in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, helps the country's numerous nationalities form their autonomous Soviet Republics and regions. (68)

If he was the initiator of industrialization,

not a single area, not a single question of industrialization escaped Stalin's field of vision. Stalin is the initiator of the creation of new branches of industry and the development and reconstruction of its earlier remaining branches. Stalin is the inspiration for the creation of the second coal and mineral center in our country, the Kuzbass construction project. Stalin is the organizer and leader of socialist construction. (110)

Finally, after the war, Stalin's activity was displayed in all its fantastic variety: "Stalin's work is exceptionally multifaceted; his energy is truly amazing.

The range of questions occupying Stalin's attention is incomprehensible: the most complex question of Marxist-Leninist theory—and school textbooks for children; problems of the Soviet Union's foreign policy—and everyday concerns about improvements to services in the proletarian capital; the creation of the Great Northern sea passage—and the draining of the Kolkhida marshes; problems of developing Soviet literature and art—and editing the statutes of kolkhoz life; and, finally, resolving the most complex questions of the theory and practice of military tactics" (239). We should really add to this list "problems of linguistics," which preoccupied Stalin, apparently without him suspecting it, all his life.

In Stalin's biography there are more than a few failures. For example, his many years in exile were not marked by a single event. Meanwhile, even these plotless periods do not stump the narrator. We are informed, for instance, that "sitting in prison, Stalin learns from his comrades arriving from the Second Party Congress of the most serious disagreements between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Stalin comes down decisively on the side of Lenin and the Bolsheviks" (19). This "comes down" is seen in this case as a kind of action. And although this "action" has no tangible results, it is precisely this which acquires the character of an event: "Cut off from the whole world, torn away from Lenin and the party centers, Stalin takes the Leninist internationalist position on questions of war, peace, and revolution. He writes letters to Lenin, speaks at the meeting of exiled Bolsheviks in the village of Monastyrskoje (1915), where Kamenev's cowardly and treacherous behavior is branded a disgrace" (56). In the context of the Stalin biography, the Stalin/Kamenev relationship in 1915 (when their importance was simply incomparable) proves to be not only real, but with a clear advantage on the side of the former. This optical effect is achieved through the old literary device of "auto-narration"—Stalin's biography is written from the end; as soon as he has been born, he is already a leader, while Kamenev is already a coward and a traitor.

This effect also defines Stalin's famous ability to "foresee" (this is foresight in reverse) "the future." This divine attribute is constantly emphasized in the biography. Thus, during collectivization,

the strategic genius of the proletarian revolution, Stalin courageously and inexorably, carefully and circumspectly led the party forward, smashing every

obstacle on the path toward the planned goal, vigilantly following the maneuvers of the class enemy and brilliantly foreseeing its actions in the near future, skillfully regrouping forces in the course of the attack itself, reinforcing occupied positions, employing reserves to develop success. (115–16)

Here Stalin's prophetic genius is so far only stylized military discourse. But this "circumspection" proved the decisive factor in the victory over Germany, insofar as in 1941, "under the leadership of Comrade Stalin, the Soviet Army implemented the tactic of active defense, which had the aim of exhausting the enemy, maximal destruction of his live forces and hardware, and preparing conditions for a switch to attack" (189).

As a result, history acquires substantiation. One could say that it substantiates itself. This ideological *perpetuum mobile* was one of the major inventions of the Stalinist historical narrative. The domain of this foresight is the word. It is clear therefore that Stalin's actions are words and instructions: Stalin

set in place the aim of erasing the Germans' military superiority in terms of tanks and airplanes.... This instruction from the leader had the greatest significance for the outcome of the war. Fulfilling this instruction, Soviet industry from month to month increased its output of planes, tanks and other battle equipment, having liquidated in the course of the war the numerical superiority of the enemy's military hardware. (191)

The actions of industry are, consequently, the results of "instructions" but, say, the battle of Stalingrad is "a brilliant victory of Stalin's strategy and tactics, a victory of the plan of genius and of the wise foresight of the great military commander, who shrewdly discovered the enemy's plans and used their weakness for his own adventurous strategy" (203). The result of these "actions," in essence, being only emanations of the Stalinist Word, appear in the form of monumental pictures: the German "standards were thrown at the feet of the Soviet people who had defeated them, at the pedestal of the Lenin mausoleum, on the tribune of which stood the Great Commander—Stalin" (221).

The actions of the Stalinist word, being an intermediary between the leader and the masses, possess a truly universal power. In essence, the

whole of Stalinist history is the history of his words: "Dealing a crippling blow to 'leftist' distortions and at the same time scattering to the winds the hopes of the interventionists, Comrade Stalin, as teacher of the millions of the masses, explained to party and nonparty cadres of what the art of leadership consists" (131). The "art of leadership" consists, as we can see, in—in a word—"dealing crippling blows" and "scattering to the winds."

We have here a pure linguistic event. Thus, returning to the events of September 1911, in one day in Petersburg Stalin (perhaps) managed to meet some active revolutionaries ("establishes links with the Petersburg party organization"), (perhaps) discussed current interparty squabbles with them ("directs and organizes the struggle against the liquidators—the Mensheviks and Trotskyites"), (perhaps) learnt what the workers were talking about ("unites and strengthens the Petersburg Bolshevik organizations"). This translation of certain actions (it does not matter whether they are real or invented) into another language constitutes the very essence of Stalinist narrative. The formation of a new linguistic field, a new discourse about reality, again leads us to a question about the nature of historical narrative.

In *Metahistory*, Hayden White notes that individual historical conception in itself possesses "coherence" and "self-consistent totality," endowing it with "distinctive stylistic attributes": "The problem here is to determine the grounds of this coherence and consistency. In my view," writes White, "these grounds are poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature." The "prefiguration" of the material underlying the presentation and substantiation White calls a "poetic act indistinguishable from the linguistic act in which the field is made ready for interpretation."¹⁷

And this "ready-made History" is the "material" from which the historical narrative is born. From this it follows that narrative is arranged in figures and tropes of various types. What White calls "historical tropology," the system of tropes in historical narrative, was formed by Stalin in the seminary, which became the first and last stages of his education. Therefore, the whole theory of political struggle (from which its history grew in Stalin's consciousness) is described in categories not only of epic

¹⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 30–31.

(biblical) time, but also of religious conduct, assimilated from the seminarists' reading circle. We find patterns of this type of thinking in the Stalin biography:

What is scientific socialism without the workers' movement? A compass which, left unused, can only grow rusty and is then only fit to be thrown overboard.

What is the workers' movement without socialism? A ship without a compass, which will still put in to the other shore, but if it has a compass, it will reach the other shore much more quickly and meeting fewer dangers.

Unite the two together and you will have a beautiful ship, which will sail directly to the other shore and reach the jetty unharmed.

Unite the workers' movement with socialism and you will have the social democratic movement, which is headed directly for the 'Promised Land.'" (28–29)

This is a classic model of clerical rhetoric, with its "dialectically opposite principles," its radical oppositions, its figurativeness (salt losing its strength is only fit to be thrown to the swine). There are multiple such examples in Stalin's texts, simulating logic, replacing it with a simple binariness, relying on the generic canon of text assimilated by him in the seminary, or on pure rhetoric: "Yes, Lord, futile are your ways! The Russian Revolution is inevitable. It is as inevitable as the sunrise! Can you stop the sun rising?" (32–33). The very appeal to such imagery endows Stalin with a passionate (although primitive) rhetoric.

Meanwhile, Stalin had an infallible sense of his reader. His narrative is in constant stylistic flux. It can shift into the language of a school textbook designed not even for pioneers, but for very young children ("Overthrown by the October Socialist Revolution, the Russian landowners and capitalists began to come to an agreement with capitalists in other countries to organize military intervention against the Soviet country. They set themselves the aim of crushing the workers and peasants, overthrowing Soviet power and enslaving our country once more" [70]), and then suddenly simulate the style of "historical-party scholarship": in his speech at the conference of Marxist Agronomists in 1929,

Comrade Stalin exposed the bourgeois theory of the “balance” of sectors in the national economy, smashed the anti-Marxist theory of “drift” in socialist construction and the anti-Marxist theory of “stability” in small-scale peasant farming. Having destroyed all these bourgeois, anti-Marxist, right-opportunist theories, Comrade Stalin gave a profound analysis of the nature of collective farms.... Comrade Stalin with his characteristic intuitive genius proved scientifically.... The great dialectician Stalin showed.... (126–27)

Note not only the familiar Khlestakovian “all” (Stalin destroyed, of course, *all* the theories), but also the very definition of these political-economic slogans as “theories.” The placing of the word “theory” in quotation marks signifies, of course, its falsehood. A theory without quotation marks, on the other hand, is a great force. It is a sign of its scientific character. Therefore, Stalin appears before us not only as a politician but also precisely as scholar (“proved scientifically”). It is easy to note that this sense of “scientific character” is created purely stylistically, by calling slogans theories.

Stalin’s trauma (he was never a theoretician) forces him to create an image of himself as a theoretician even when it is definitively irrelevant. We are informed, for example, that “leading the military action of the Soviet armed forces and economic-organizational work in the rear, Comrade Stalin during the war continued his enormous theoretical activity, reworking Marxist-Leninist scholarship and moving it forward” (225). What does this actually mean? It turns out that “Comrade Stalin made the most important conclusion about the great historical service of the Russian people before the history of mankind.... Comrade Stalin appraised the Soviet people as a heroic people, capable of creating miracles and emerging the victor from the most arduous tests” (229).

The “scientific character” of Stalin’s texts is constructed on the principle of “accessibility,” according to which the reader receives the “theory” in the form of a kind of axiom. Correspondingly, the antitheory (theory in quotation marks) is constructed on a reduction to a simple opposition of “antitheory” and “theory.” For example:

The fainthearted Zinoviev and Kamenev tried to oppose Stalin’s plan for socialist industrialization with their own “plan,” according to which the USSR

should remain an agricultural country. This was a treacherous plan to enslave the USSR and deliver it bound hand and foot to the imperialist plunderers. Stalin ripped off the masks from these despicable faint hearts, revealing their Trotskyite-Menshevist essence. (103)

It is unimportant that the battle with Zinoviev and Kamenev did not touch on questions of industrialization (as we know, this problem arose after their departure from the party's Mount Olympus). What is important is that the "plan" (again the semantically important quotation marks) was "treacherous" and, even more precisely, "betrayed the USSR to the imperialist plunderers bound hand and foot." This final picture ("bound hand and foot," "imperialist plunderers") was, of course, maximally accessible to the mass reader. It does not matter precisely what the "faint hearts" said. What does matter is that they did something terrible.

The logic of opposition ("not that, but this," "if that, then this," and so on) cements Stalinist discourse, making even a potential unaxiomatic judgment of events impossible. It reveals itself in authentic appearances by Stalin, samples of which we meet not infrequently in the leader's biography. This is a typical Stalin utterance: "We don't need to mollycoddle the party, but to develop vigilance in it, we don't need to sing it to sleep, but to maintain it in a condition of battle readiness, we don't need to disarm, but to take up arms, we don't need to demobilize, but to maintain a state of mobilization for the realization of the Second Five-Year Plan" (145). Or: "If we have good and numerous cadres in industry, agriculture, transport, the army, our country will be invincible. Without such cadres we will be in a bad way" (151).

We have here a pure tautological construction. Analyzing these "linguistic games," Mikhail Epstein called the template according to which such constructions are created "relativistic patterns of totalitarian thinking."¹⁸ It is worth, however, noting that this type of discourse inevitably disintegrates: the ties of meaning are corroded by the tautological babbling, when there lie before us perfectly hollow constructions of "homogeneity," such as: "One has to consider as Stalin's great service the fact that in this period,

¹⁸ See Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism & Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 101–63.

in the period of the development of industrialization and collectivization, when it was necessary to mobilize the entire labor force of the country to resolve the great tasks ahead, he posed the women question in all its magnitude, the question of the position of women, of women's work, of the most important role of women, female workers, and peasants in the economic and social-political life of society, and, having raised it to its necessary heights, gave it the correct solution" (120).

This sentence consists of two parts: a description of the "period" and of the "action" which took place. Both parts are constructed on the enumeration of homogenous supplements, which in no way add to one another ("the women question" = "the question of the position of women" = the question "of women's work" = the question "the most important role of women, female workers and peasants in the economic and social-political life of society"; characteristically, the tautology permeates all levels of the construction: "female workers and peasants" are "women," so that all "elucidating" constructions turn out likewise to be superfluous).

Stalinist discourse is a logical trap. It is constructed by locking the narrative into a circle, from which there is only one exit—inside. This is the origin of the blazing Stalinist style. "Everyone knows the irresistible, shattering style of Stalin's logic, the crystal clarity of his mind" (239). Stalinist history demonstrates this "shattering clarity" at its fullest.

The genre difference between the biography of Lenin and the autobiography of Stalin lies on the surface. The issue is the splitting of the narrator. We have before us an autobiography of the other, of Stalin's alter ego. But this double was also an important character in the personal drama of Stalin, who spent all his life building up his "third person." Therefore, it is the biography of Lenin which turns out to be the biography of this other, while the autobiography of Stalin himself is transformed into a biography of Stalin as leader. We have here a genre collapse: Stalin could not write an autobiography, insofar as he was writing a biography of that same Stalin, about whom he spoke and thought in the third person, and at whose official portrait he pointed when speaking to his son. As a result, tautological production reached its peak: we are told at least twice the biographical story of one and the same person (with different biographies). It is a true emanation of power—of the main narrator, and, in the final analysis, of the main consumer of his

own narratives, concerned with his own legitimacy, and producing a particular poetics of ideological discourse; power is the aim and the subject of the narration.

We will try, however, to define the actions of the narrator of the leaders' biographies. Firstly, it is an artistic work (the production of a new "historical" reality); secondly, it is a linguistic operation (the creation of the very discourse about the past); thirdly, it is a poetic process ("historical tropology," to use White's words); fourthly, it is a translation (from the language of a certain possible reality in Stalinist narrative); fifthly, it is intensive genre production (transformation of the genres of biography and autobiography).

As we can see, all these actions are exclusively literary attributes. They bear no sign of reflected reality, or they bear them only as concomitant factors. Their central problem is the problem of authorship. These are the most anonymous and simultaneously the most public texts in Soviet culture (Andrei Zhdanov's words at the Twentieth-Eighth Congress about the *Short Course* are inserted in the biography: "We must say directly that in the time Marxism has existed, this is the first Marxist book which has been so widely disseminated" [164]). The paradox of the anonymity of these texts consists in the fact that Stalin was acting as narrator. The bifurcated narrator was anonymous only in the sense that Stalin himself was talking about Stalin in the third person. But the Stalin of the first person was also that same power which expounded its chief word—its history—and produced its own image. Therefore in the sense of authorship the texts under examination are the most transparent in Soviet culture. At least, it is obvious that they could not be subject to any censorship, even hypothetically, since the highest censor was himself their author.

As regards Stalin's main historical book, the *Short Course*, this "Bible of Stalinism,"¹⁹ it is worth noting that the question of the authorship of this text was resolved by the Stalin biography itself. Here we read: "in 1938 *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, written by Comrade Stalin and approved by the commission of the Central Committee, was published" (163). This direct indication of Stalin's authorship of the *Short Course* is also corroborated in his biography by

¹⁹ Glovin'skii, "Ne puskat' proshlogo na samotek," 151.

reference to the fact that at least the celebrated “philosophical chapter” of the *Short Course* was written directly by Stalin: “I. V. Stalin’s work *On Dialectical and Historical Materialism*,” written by the incomparable master of the Marxist dialectical method, generalizing from his gigantic practical and theoretical experience of Bolshevism, raises dialectical materialism to a new, higher level, and is the true peak of Marxist-Leninist philosophical thought.” Undoubtedly, the *Short Course* is the most important link in the chain of the three main books, which bind together the ideological, historical, literary, mythological and, finally, mental vaults of the edifice of culture in the Stalinist era.

5. STALIN AS HISTORICAL NOVELIST (THE *SHORT COURSE* AS A SOCIALIST REALIST TEXT)

The entire history of human relations, Marxism teaches us, is the history of the struggle for alienation and—with alienation. Under capitalism labor is the object of alienation. Under socialism this object is obviously the power itself.

The individual is pushed beyond the bounds of political reality and real social relations, into a world of prosthetic, “substitute” forms of reality. These forms which have no reference acquire a key significance—the significance of reality itself. They are self-referential. Hence the role played in Stalinist culture by socialist realist art and various forms of political-aesthetic ritual. The aim of this culture is indeed political-aesthetic: the creation of a new reality is a necessary constitutive substitute for alienated reality. Historicizing Stalinist culture plays a special role here: the masses receive their history (as with all other prostheses) from the hands of authority—unnamed—from the leader. The status of historical texts in this case is enormous, while the creation of a master plot for culture is the direct task for the leader and can be solved only by him. In this sense, the *Short Course* created a master plot for the super-genres of Soviet art: the historical-revolutionary novel, play or film; literary, theater of cinema Leniniana and Staliniana.

As Mikhail Glovin’skii noted, the *Short Course* was a “sacred book” of communism,

because it lies at the very center of its ideology, mythology, language. It sums up everything that comes before it in Marxism-Leninism, codifies its elements, endowing them with a canonical form, but it relates not only to the past. Even now, when it has been forgotten as an independent text, it remains as a collection of verbal turns of phrase and formulae which for decades lived on in the communist language. It is, undoubtedly, the focus of newspeak, its unsurpassed model, and at the same time a collection of idioms, official metaphors and even official swearwords. Demoted, forgotten and sent to a museum, it nevertheless continued to influence life. It remained a classic exemplar of totalitarian narrative (both historical and literary), a model for party historians and writers, one of the foundations of socialist realism.²⁰

We find ourselves in the world of Soviet eschatology. The fundamental aim of the political-aesthetic project is the adaptation of ultimate knowledge to everyday life. In the process of this reforging of eschatology into history, the latter must be transformed into a new mode of operation, as “for Bolshevism could become the ideological sanction of Stalinist rule, and then of all the totalitarian regimes of Europe and Asia, its dynamic structures had to be within the bounds of possible substitution by statics.”²¹ In future we will call theses “statics” “logic,” which create a new historical modality and reality.

“But why,” asks Glovin’skii, “was the book expounding this myth (in essence, the main intellectual monument of Stalinism, added to the biographies of the two leaders) called the *Short Course*?” Glovin’skii suggests that it was meant to show that this was part of some sort of vast work which would at some point be fulfilled. But he claims that there is “no satisfactory answer to this question.”²² We have already discussed the nature of “short narratives.” Here something else is important: what does “course” mean? Is this a textbook or a history? Stalin the leader as teacher substitutes various kinds of “sketches” of party history (of which there were very many by the mid-1930s) with a single “course.” But a “course” is also a channel, the “general line,” directed toward the past. Any kind of

²⁰ Ibid., 158–59.

²¹ Kara-Murza, *Totalitarizm kak istoricheskii fenomen*, 18–19.

²² Glovin’skii, “Ne puskat’ proshlogo na samotek”, 157.

deviation from it is impossible. Because at the point when the book came out, in 1938, history, having only just begun (the publication of Stalin's "Holy Writ"), had already ended; its continuation did not follow. We will return to this point at the end of our discussion.

For now, we will turn to another important aspect of this problem: the fundamental party document turns out to be not a program (looking forward, in the usual manner) but a history (looking backward). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt expressed the idea that in becoming mass movements, parties reject programs. Parties require in this case an image of the "masses" (not of the working class, on which the Bolsheviks were staked, coming into power, but of the whole of society, which now becomes the "masses"). One could suggest that in this optical shift the program (perspective) is substituted by the reverse perspective: history. In this sense the *Short Course* history of the party is in essence the party's program. One can certainly claim that in the 1930s the party had no concrete program of aims, while its formulated aims were exclusively political-pragmatic, that is, they were defined by the conditions of the struggle for power and the resolution of urgent problems of the concentration and retention of power. The future becomes a hostage to an expropriated past. Thus history is transformed into a program.

In order to understand the nature of this discourse, we shall turn to Karl Mannheim's typology of utopian consciousness. In *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim singles out, in particular, the conservative utopia ("bureaucratic conservatism") which corresponds most precisely to the discourse realized in the *Short Course*. Characteristic of this type of thinking are statics, reliance on a military type of action, and the judicial-administrative mentality of the military bureaucrat, subjecting life to order. This mentality depends on a particular historical optics, in which any historical transformation is the product of practical control, which "cannot be artificially constructed, but grows, like a plant from a seed."²³

Two results at least follow from Mannheim's characteristics: panhistoricism (everything must "grow" and "ripen") and a total "reckoning up" (logic) of history, linked with "practical control" over society. The *Short*

²³ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1954), 210, 229.

Course realizes this program in its entirety. Stalin's trauma, and the reasoning characteristic of him, acquired in the seminary, turn the discourse of the *Short Course* into the ultimate model of panlogism.

Its first distinguishing peculiarity is its distinctive total "nominalism" (namely, those famous "statements" in the book, which were subject to rote learning "point by point"), when the "reading through" of every phenomenon is replaced by its "reckoning up." As a rule, the "meaning" of phenomena is defined thus:

The historic significance of this celebrated book [*What Is to Be Done?*] lies in the fact that in it Lenin:

1. For the first time in the history of Marxist thought, laid bare the ideological roots of ...
2. Brought out the great importance of ...
3. Brilliantly substantiated that ...
4. Gave a brilliant exposition of ...²⁴

Not infrequently such methods are substituted for the narrative itself. Many works by Lenin are "expounded" by "statements," with points and subpoints. The reader is faced with extensive quotations, sometimes taking up entire pages, with interjections such as: "Lenin wrote:"—quotation; "And further:"—quotation; "And again:"—quotation; "Or again:"—quotation. The finale of such an exposition is the same chain of "statements."

Characteristically, this means of exposition is extended not only to "ready-made" texts, but also to historical events themselves, which (strengthened by Stalin's "verbiage") are also transformed into kinds of "texts":

1. The October Revolution was confronted by an enemy so comparatively weak, so badly organized, and so politically inexperienced as the Russian bourgeoisie ...

²⁴ *Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1939), 37–38. Translations of this text are taken from *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939), 38. Further references to this work are given in parentheses in the text, with the page numbers of the original given first.

2. The October Revolution was headed by so revolutionary a class as the working class of Russia ...
3. The working class of Russia had so effective an ally in the revolution as the poor peasantry ...
4. The working class was headed by a party so tried and tested in political battles as the Bolshevik Party ...
5. The October Revolution began at a time when ... (202–4; 212–14)

The chain of these five “conclusions” only externally contains any information. It is sufficient to glance “inside” these “statements” to be convinced that they are merely stylistic “ellipses,” pure tautology. For example:

- 2) The October Revolution was headed by so revolutionary a class as the working class of Russia, a class which had been steeled in battle, which had in a short space passed through two revolutions, and which by the eve of the third revolution had won recognition as the leader of the people in the struggle for peace, land, liberty, and socialism. If the revolution had not had a leader like the working class of Russia, a leader that had earned the confidence of the people, there would have been no alliance between the workers and peasants, and without such an alliance the victory of the October Revolution would have been impossible. (203; 212–13)

We will not be mistaken if we say that “logic” in the *Short Course* consistently replaces history. The “heart” of the *Short Course* is the “philosophical chapter,” “On dialectic and historical materialism,” in effect an independent work, breaking off the historical narrative, this is the very fragment which in the Stalin biography was called the “peak of Marxist-Leninist philosophical thought.” This is the true methodology of Stalinist historical thinking, in which the terrorist logic of the Stalinist narrative is revealed in all its totality.

Above all, we are informed that “dialectical materialism is the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party” (99; 105). Take note: not philosophy, but “world outlook,” that is, to put it bluntly, ideology. It is this that defines the course of the historical narrative, turning it into reasoning. For example: “The slave system would be senseless, stupid, and unnatural under modern conditions. But under the conditions of a disintegrating primitive communal system, the slave system is a quite understandable

and natural phenomenon" (104, 110). The whole of the Stalinist system of thought is permeated with this type of opposition: things are either "stupid" or "natural." Clearly, Stalin is operating here not so much with scientific or historical as with certain (artistic-figurative) constructions which are placed in opposition to each other.

Between these poles we have the same cascade of "statements" "following" one after the other. The account proceeds excitedly:

Further, if the world is in a state of constant movement and development, if ... then it is clear that... [H]ence the capitalist system can be replaced by the socialist system, just as at one time the feudal system was replaced by the capitalist system. Hence we must not base our orientation on the strata of society which.... Hence, in order not to err in politics, one must look forward, not backward. Further, if the passing of slow quantitative changes into rapid and abrupt qualitative changes is a law of development, then it is clear that... Hence the transition from capitalism to socialism ... cannot be effected by ... [or] by ..., but only by.... Hence, in order not to err in policy, one must be a revolutionary, not a reformist. Further, if development proceeds by way of the disclosure of internal contradictions,... then it is clear that.... Hence we must not cover up the contradictions of the capitalist system, but disclose and unravel them; we must not try to check the class struggle but carry it to its conclusion. Hence, in order not to err in policy, one must.... (105-6; 110-11)

We have here an endless chain of "logemes." Within them they carry the same tautology, formed by a homogenous series, synonymity and antonymic "oppositions."

Such is the mechanism of the production of images in the Stalinist narrative. Apparently, by virtue of its speculative logicity, it can work without failure practically endlessly. However, one other thing is included—a strictly literary principle, a kind of "emergency system of nourishment." We are speaking fundamentally of literariness, insofar as Stalin called it the dialectic "between the spirit and the letter" of theory. The whole irreproachable logical chain can be destroyed by one artistic effect—changing the relationship between "letter and spirit":

Marxist-Leninist theory ... as a science ... does not and cannot stand still, but develops and perfects itself. Clearly, in its development it is bound to

become enriched by new experience and new knowledge, and some of its propositions and conclusions are bound to change in the course of time, are bound to be replaced by new conclusions and ideas.... Mastering the Marxist-Leninist theory does not at all mean learning all its formulas and conclusions by heart and clinging to their every letter. To master the Marxist-Leninist theory we must first of all learn to distinguish between its letter and substance. (339; 355)

How is this art of “distinguishing” to be mastered? Lenin, of course, is brought in as a model:

What would have happened to the party, to our revolution, to Marxism, if Lenin had been overawed by the letter of Marxism and had not had the courage to replace one of the old propositions of Marxism, formulated by Engels, by the new proposition regarding the republic of Soviets, a proposition that corresponded to the new historical conditions? The party would have groped in the dark, the Soviets would have been disorganized, we should not have had a Soviet power, and the Marxist theory would have suffered a severe setback. The proletariat would have lost, and the enemies of the proletariat would have won....

What would have happened to the party, to our revolution, to Marxism, if Lenin had been overawed by the letter of Marxism and had not had the courage of theoretical conviction to discard one of the old conclusions of Marxism and to replace it by a new conclusion affirming that the victory of socialism in one country, taken singly, was possible, a conclusion which corresponded to the new historical conditions? The party would have groped in the dark, the proletarian revolution would have been deprived of leadership, and the Marxist theory would have begun to decay. The proletariat would have lost, and the enemies of the proletariat would have won. (341; 356–57)

This is a true hymn to the “spirit.” A strange picture is revealed: the party in the dark, the Soviets disorganized, no Soviet power, revolution without leadership, theory in decay—and all this, if Lenin had been “overawed by the letter.” What, then, is the strength of the “spirit”? It is its “historical logic.” This Ariadne’s thread also leads the reader to the future. The *Short Course*, Glovin’skii writes, tells of

the formation of a certain world order, in which the factors of progress, order, ideological correctness gain the upper hand over the forces of evil and over chaos.... This is a kind of book of Genesis, and at the same time theogony, in which the place of the Olympian gods is occupied by the two party leaders; its crowning becomes the full victory of the new order, equivalent to the removal of everyone and everything which would prevent its accession.²⁵

By what means is this victory guaranteed? By the fact that the “logic of history” works on “us.”

It is natural to suggest that the result of such a reading of history—through the imaginary nature and logical subjunctivity of Stalinist historicism—becomes the construction of history itself, according to logic. For example:

The Bolsheviks wanted to create a new party, a *Bolshevist* party.... They worked for it stubbornly, persistently, in spite of everything.... Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* was the *ideological* preparation for such a party. Lenin’s *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* was the *organizational* preparation for such a party. Lenin’s *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* was the *political* preparation for such a party. And, lastly, Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* was the *theoretical* preparation for such a party. (135–36; 140–41)

We have here a kind of chain of chronologically consecutive events. But the sequence here is only the product of the systematics of process, confirming its “logicality.”

This is the origin of Stalin’s predilection for “repeated” constructions, which in their rhythmical monotony simulate the idea of the “sequence” and “logicality” of *what has already happened*:

The revolution would win only if headed by the proletariat; if the proletariat, as the leader of the revolution, secured an alliance with the peasantry; if the liberal bourgeoisie were isolated; if the Social Democratic Labour Party took an active part in the organization of the uprising of the people against tsardom;

²⁵ Glovin’skii, “Ne puskat’ proshlogo na samotek”, 147–48.

if, as the result of a successful uprising, a provisional revolutionary government were set up that would be capable of destroying the counterrevolution root and branch and convening a constituent assembly representing the whole people; and if the Social Democratic Labour Party did not refuse, the circumstances being favorable, to take part in the provisional revolutionary government in order to carry the revolution to its conclusion. (62; 64)

These “ifs” signify not conditions here at all, but results; they had already taken place. But, in shifting modality, Stalin turns history (in this case he is talking about the 1905 revolution) into logic, the past into a program. The effect, as we can see, is achieved exclusively by stylistic means.

It is from here that we get Stalin's favorite reinforcing structure: “From then on there were bound to appear—and there actually did appear—thousands upon thousands, whole battalions of Red experts, who had mastered technique and were able to direct industries.... All this was bound to promote, and actually did promote, the work of economic reconstruction” (301; 315); “The new electoral system was bound to result, and actually did result, in an enhancement of the political activity of the people” (333; 348). “Were bound to appear”—“and actually did appear”; “was bound to promote”—“and actually did promote”; “was bound to result”—“and actually did result.” All this is not merely a style but a philosophy of history: what “actually” happens is what “was bound” to happen. And it happened only because it “was bound” to be. It is as if actions are “written” in a secret book of power, which it is given only to the leader to read.

It is this which leads to the already noted epithets which accompany reference to any classic work (“In his *well-known* article, ‘Where to Begin?’ Lenin outlined a concrete plan for the building of the party, a plan which was later expanded in his *famous* work *What Is to Be Done?*” (32; 32); “In his *historic* book, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, Lenin gave a *classical* criticism of the tactics of the Mensheviks and a brilliant substantiation of the Bolshevik tactics” (62; 65); “Here is the *brilliant* formulation of the essence of historical materialism given by Marx in 1859 in his *historic* preface to his *famous* book, *Critique of Political Economy*” (126; 130; emphasis throughout is ours—E.D.)—these works fulfill certain logical links in history (that is why they are “famous,” “brilliant,”

“historic,” and “classic”). This image of historical reality as a kind of logical reality (that is of a purely intellectual construction) is the highest achievement of Stalinist artistic thinking. Clearly, in this case, historical reality itself (the past) lacks any kind of independent value whatever: it can be assembled, invented, and even fabricated. The important thing is that it is valid, so to speak, logically, that is, figuratively.

Thus history appears before us radically reworked by the narrator. This image of the author given to us in the form of Stalinist historical logic, forces us to look at the subject, so to speak, from the “personal” point of view.

This sense of the “subjectivity” which we examined earlier (in relation to the Lenin and Stalin biographies) is realized in the *Short Course* much more stylistically and in a more generically refined way than in the traditional genres of “personal narrative” (biography, autobiography). The construction by the narrator of his own image in the *Short Course* is realized not so much *through the image of the other* (Lenin), or *through Stalin the author’s own “third person,”* as *through an impersonal image, namely through the image of the party.*

The *Short Course* opens with this presentation of the subject: the party was born “on the basis of the working-class movement in prerevolutionary Russia; it sprang from the Marxist circles and groups which had established connection with the working-class movement and imparted to it a socialist consciousness” (3; 1). The party is a living organism. Its coming into being came about as a result of fertilization. Such a consistently metonymic representation of the party permeates the entire *Short Course*. Whether it is a question of the organization as a whole, or of some events or other within its (in the literal sense of the word) “life.” For example, the Second Party Congress is depicted precisely as if it is a person: “The congress did not prove equal to its task in matters of organization, showed vacillation, and at times even gave the preponderance to the Mensheviks; and although it corrected its position toward the end, it was nevertheless unable to expose the opportunism of the Mensheviks on matters of organization and to isolate them in the party, or even to put such a task before the party” (43; 44).

However, the greatest expressivity appears when the narrator interrupts the narrative with extensive lyrical monologues, in which it is easy to read Stalin’s chronic traumas. The true “master” of the political maneuver, Sta-

lin more than once retreated, maneuvered, tolerated forced alliances, and so on. All this political trauma flowed out into the lyrical digressions of the *Short Course*. But most frequently of all Stalin's lyricism constituted ordinary rhetoric, filled with familiar tropes, sophisms, arguments over words, colloquial constructions, rhetorical questions, "irreconcilable oppositions," passionate invectives, when it touched on what really wounded the traumatized soul of the leader:

And what did the social democratic parties of the West represent at that time? A mixture, a hodgepodge of Marxist and opportunist elements, of friends and foes of the revolution, of supporters and opponents of the party principle, the former gradually becoming ideologically reconciled to the latter, and virtually subordinated to them. Conciliation with the opportunists, with the traitors to the revolution, for the sake of what?—the Bolsheviks asked the West European social democrats. For the sake of "peace within the party," for the sake of "unity"—the latter replied. Unity with whom, with the opportunists? Yes, they replied, with the opportunists. It was clear that such parties could not be revolutionary parties. (135; 140)

These "internal monologues," acquiring here even the form of a type of dialogue (with himself), undoubtedly belong to Stalin. Before us we have the exemplary Stalinist "interrogative" narrative. He also spoke in the same way in his public appearances, when such "dialogues" with the auditorium were transformed into one enormous rhetorical question as, for example, at the all-union conference of Stakhanovites at the Kremlin in November 1935:

Is it not clear that the Stakhanovites are innovators in our industry, that the Stakhanov movement represents the future of our industry, that it contains the seed of the future rise in the cultural and technical level of the working class, that it opens to us the path by which alone can be achieved those high indices of productivity of labor which are essential for the transition from socialism to communism and for the elimination of the distinction between mental labor and manual labor. (324; 339–40)

This is typical catechistic discourse, a "translation of reality into the profane language of question-and-answer. Catechistic thinking distorts actu-

ality by imitating dialogue. The author of the answers is the initiator of the speech acts himself, not the real partner in the dialogue.”²⁶ This leads to the “dialogue” having a preprogrammed result. The answers fill the void of anxiety, expectation, doubt. It is also from here that we get the familiar seminary tropes (“The Bolsheviks, on the contrary, waged a relentless struggle against the opportunists, purged the proletarian party of the filth of opportunism” [137; 142–43], expanding sometimes into broad [“generalizing”] constructions).

The logical cascade raining down on the reader, the avalanche of sophisms, which bury any hope of a possible way out from the captivity of language, has a clear aim: to stump the reader. *A hopeless logic*, the *Short Course*’s own kind of magic, shocks one with its aggressiveness. The reader, as the object of aggression, is seen as a criminal, searching for a loophole from the captivity of the “objective laws of the historical process,” as a rebel and a dangerous dissident, whose psychology can be suppressed only by powerful psychotropic treatments.

The process of the “objectification” of logic lies at the basis of Stalinist historical thinking, transforming fantasy and the will of the leader into “objective reasons” and “historical laws.” Undoubtedly, such transformations of reality require no little artistic effort. Simultaneously, this union of will and “logic,” fantasy and “historical law” (“the very course of history”) contains the true secret of this hymn to the integrity of the world: the “law” turns history from chaos to cosmos. However, language turns this cosmos into a golden cage: from this “integrity,” from this “harmony,” there is no escape. The syntactic constructions themselves are links in the chain, tightly securing the reader in the kingdom of harmony. Therefore this book became the annals of Soviet culture, the “gates” of the kingdom of socialism. It is also clear that the criminals are those who wish to stop the “historical process,” to destroy the integrity, the harmony. Their actions cannot develop otherwise than in conditions of conspiracy. But conspiracy—again—is “logic,” the plot, narrative, detective story. The conspiratorial view of reality turns logic into a historical event.

²⁶ Oleg V. Belyi, *Tainy podpol'nogo cheloveka (Khudozhestvennoe slovo—Obydennoe soznanie—Semiotika vlasti)* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1991), 90.

The very model of Stalinist discourse is impossible without the image of the other as an enemy. Conspiracy was, of course, Stalin's trauma, but it is worth seeing this phenomenon from a wider perspective: the Bolsheviks when they came to power were (literally) yesterday's illegal, underground men, conspirators, plotters, who had spent their whole lives dealing with the repressive machinery of the state. Soviet power had conspiracy in its blood. The conspiratorial mindset, having taken on in the *Short Course* (in the historical-revolutionary film, literature, turning revolutionary underground men into heroes) a paranoid form, had a single aim: legitimization (the conspirator and the underground man differ from others in their illegitimacy). The achievement of this aim is to the highest degree traumatic: it is a question of the fact that the illegal minority has to base the legitimacy of its power on the legal majority, to legitimize the formerly illegal. This is what leads to the morbid bias toward repressive solutions to problems of legitimacy: as has already been said, the Bolsheviks were best of all acquainted with the repressive side of the state.

Stalin, concentrating all the power in his own hands, also took on the traumas of that power. Therefore, when we say that the party is presented in the *Short Course* as a person, we have in mind a concrete person, speaking of himself as "the party." This discussion about the party becomes particularly personified when it touches on the question of power itself (that is, on Stalin personally):

Since the achievements of socialism in our country meant the victory of the policy of the party and the utter bankruptcy of their own policy, these gentry, instead of admitting the obvious facts and joining the common cause, began to revenge themselves on the party and the people for their own failure, for their own bankruptcy; they began to resort to foul play and sabotage against the cause of the workers and collective farmers, to blow up pits, set fire to factories, and commit acts of wrecking in collective and state farms.... And in order, while doing so, to shield their puny group from exposure and destruction, they simulated loyalty to the party, fawned upon it, eulogized it, cringed before it more and more, while in reality continuing their underhand, subversive activities against the workers and peasants.

At the Seventeenth Party Congress, Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky made repentant speeches, praising the party and extolling its achievements to the skies. But the congress detected a ring of insincerity and duplicity in their

speeches.... Speeches were also made at the Seventeenth Congress by the Trotskyites Zinoviev and Kamenev, who lashed themselves extravagantly for their mistakes, and eulogized the party no less extravagantly for its achievements. But the congress could not help seeing that both their nauseating self-castigation and their fulsome praise of the party were only meant to hide an uneasy and unclean conscience. However, the party did not yet know or suspect that while these gentry were making their cloying speeches at the congress they were hatching a villainous plot against the life of S. M. Kirov. (310; 325)

Revenge, foul play, sabotage, fawning, cringing, “the congress detected,” “the congress could not help seeing.” What (or more precisely, whom) is he talking about?

Shortly after the Fifteenth Party Congress, the expelled anti-Leninists began to hand in statements, recanting Trotskyism and asking to be reinstated in the party. Of course, at that time the party could not yet know that Trotsky, Rakovsky, Radek, Krestinski, Sokolnikov, and others had long been enemies of the people, spies recruited by foreign espionage services, and that Kamenev, Zinoviev, Pyatakov, and others were already forming connections with enemies of the USSR in capitalist countries for the purpose of “collaboration” with them against the Soviet people. But experience had taught the party that any knavery might be expected from these individuals:

Desiring to be clement to them, and loath to deny them an opportunity of once again becoming men of the party and of the working class, the party reinstated them in its ranks.

However, time showed that, with few exceptions, the recantations of the “leading lights” of the bloc of Trotskyites and Zinovievites were false and hypocritical from beginning to end. (290f.)

And also:

It turned out that even before they had handed in their applications, these gentry had ceased to represent a political trend ready to defend their views before the people, and had become an unprincipled gang of careerists who

were prepared publicly to trample on the last remnants of their own views, publicly to praise the views of the party, which were alien to them, and—like chameleons—to adopt any coloring, provided they could maintain themselves in the ranks of the party and the working class and have the opportunity to do harm to the working class and to its party.

The “leading lights” of the bloc of Trotskyites and Zinovievites proved to be political swindlers, political double-dealers. (276–77; 289–91)

“The party could not know,” “experience had taught the party,” “the party was skeptical,” “the party desired.” This quite surreal picture is unexpectedly interrupted by a passionate monologue by Stalin, which tells us nothing factual, but explains everything:

Political double-dealers usually begin with deceit and prosecute their nefarious ends by deceiving the people, the working class, and the party of the working class. But political double-dealers are not to be regarded as mere humbugs. Political double-dealers are an unprincipled gang of political careerists who, having long ago lost the confidence of the people, strive to insinuate themselves once more into their confidence by deception, by chameleon-like changes of color, by fraud, by any means, only that they might retain the title of political figures. Political double-dealers are an unprincipled gang of political careerists who are ready to seek support anywhere, even among criminal elements, even among the scum of society, even among the mortal enemies of the people, only that they might be able, at a “propitious” moment, again to mount the political stage and to clamber on to the back of the people as their “rulers.” The “leading lights” of the bloc of Trotskyites and Zinovievites were political double-dealers of this very description. (278; 291)

These passionate words, of course, betray the unconscious intentions of Stalin himself: he could model the image of his “enemies” only on himself, and because of this no “ideological considerations” could be taken into account. The words about the “unprincipled gang of political careerists,” conspiracies, Machiavellian tricks—everything poured out from the “damp basement” of Stalin’s unconscious into the heads of the enemies killed by him—are the sole reality of Stalin’s texts.

Strictly speaking, history itself is important as a product (and lesson!) of the struggle with the underground and conspiracy. Its topicality becomes

obvious. In this context, clearly, words such as “opposition” lose all substantiation. It is not Stalin who proves this, but the show trials of 1936–38—in their own way the “Judgment of History.” Indeed, the very conception of conspiracy is an attempt to return events to the bosom of the “laws of history.” Simply (outside conspiracy), the battle of different individuals and directions for power had no logic, no common denominator. Conspiracy is the only basis for explaining reality and for the construction of the historical narrative. The light of conspiracy clears up everything. This picture is sharply regularized. We are again in a prearranged history.

The conception of conspiracy is expanded not only into party history but into Russian history as a whole:

While the war was in progress it was discovered that Sukhomlinov, the tsar’s minister of war, was a traitor, who was connected with German spies, and was carrying out the instructions of the German espionage service to disorganize the supply of munitions and to leave the front without guns and rifles. Some of the tsarist ministers and generals surreptitiously assisted the success of the German army: together with the tsarina, who had German ties, they betrayed military secrets to the Germans. (167; 173)

Both the course of the war and its outcome, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, turned out to be swathed in a network of conspiracy. Here we have, of course, the “sinister scheme [of] Trotsky and his accomplice Bukharin,” which was “playing into the hands of the German imperialists,” “hostile to the party but camouflaged ... under the name of ‘left communists’” (206; 216). What they did “was monstrous. The German imperialists could have desired nothing more from this traitor to the interests of the Soviet country” (207; 216), while the “left communists” were

sinking deeper and deeper into the slough of treachery.... At that time the real cause of this antiparty behavior of Trotsky and the “left communists” was not yet clear to the party. But the recent trial of the anti-Soviet “Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” [at the beginning of 1938] has now revealed that Bukharin and the group of “left communists” headed by him, together with Trotsky

and the “left” Socialist Revolutionaries, were at that time secretly conspiring against the Soviet government. (208; 217–18)

The “left” Socialist Revolutionaries revolt was also their handiwork:

As the trial of the Anti-Soviet “Block of Rights and Trotskyites” has now established, the revolt of the “left” Socialist Revolutionaries was started with the knowledge and consent of Bukharin and Trotsky and was part of a general counterrevolutionary conspiracy of the Bukharinites, Trotskyites, and “left” Socialist Revolutionaries against the Soviet power. (213; 223)

Conspiracy allows the creation of plot-retardation: insofar as the “party” *then* did not know what it *now* knows, all Trotsky’s actions have the “intriguing” epithet “suspicious” attached to them, sometimes accompanied by the idea of “direct treachery” and “betrayal” (say, Trotsky’s and Tukhachevsky’s actions during the anti-Polish campaign are qualified as “direct assistance, not to our Western Front, however, but to the Polish gentry and the Entente” [231; 242]). But the main issue is the development of the conspiracy plot.

If earlier the behavior of the opposition was qualified as “antiparty,” then the 1927 demonstration organized by the Trotskyites is called “anti-Soviet”:

Now there was no longer any doubt that the Trotskyites and Zinovievites had become definitely anti-Soviet. During the general party discussion they had appealed to the party against the Central Committee; now, during their puny demonstration, they had taken the course of appealing to the hostile classes against the party and the Soviet state. Once they had made it their aim to undermine the Bolshevik Party, they were bound to go to the length of undermining the Soviet state, for in the Soviet Union the Bolshevik Party and the state are inseparable. That being the case, the ringleaders of the bloc of Trotskyites and Zinovievites had outlawed themselves from the party, for men who had sunk to the depths of anti-Soviet action could no longer be tolerated in the ranks of the Bolshevik Party. (272; 285)

Enemies of the party are transformed into enemies of the state, their leaders are called “ring leaders,” although there is no word of a “gang” just yet. But a few dozen pages later we learn, however, that they are, precisely, a “gang”:

To such depths of duplicity and villainy had these people sunk that Zinoviev, who was one of the organizers and instigators of the assassination of S. M. Kirov, and who had urged the murderer to hasten the crime, wrote an obituary of Kirov speaking of him in terms of eulogy, and demanded that it be published.

The Zinovievites simulated remorse in court; but they persisted in their duplicity even in the dock.... They concealed from the court their connections with the Bukharinites, and the existence of a united Trotsky-Bukharin gang of fascist hirelings. As it later transpired, the murder of Comrade Kirov was the work of this united Trotsky-Bukharin gang.

Even then, in 1935, it had become clear that the Zinoviev group was a camouflaged White Guard organization whose members fully deserved to be treated as White Guards (311; 326).

This “gang” is turned before our eyes into a “White Guard organization.”

This gradualism betrays the true storyteller in Stalin. It is worth noting Stalin’s tone when discussing the murder of Kirov: Zinoviev is declared not only to be the inspiration behind the murder, but his very actions (invented by Stalin, of course) are described in “realistic” expressive form (“urged the murderer to hasten the crime”). Describing “history” in this way, Stalin not only forces the reader to believe it, but also, it seems, begins to believe it himself.

Conspiracy engenders a new semantic field, in which the narrative is shifted between two poles—abusive language and sarcasm. The *Short Course*, as the main literary monument of Stalinism, also remained the main official document of the Stalin era. Its status was undoubtedly higher than that of the decisions of congresses or resolutions of the plenums of the Central Committee. What is even more surprising is that this text consists of an expressive—above all abusive—vocabulary, which is unprecedented in a document of this level (“leftist babblers,” “political freaks,” “utter ignoramuses,” “straightforward capitulators,” “panickers,” “concocted a platform,” “slandorous accusations,” “hinted vilely,” “sheer slander,” “concocted a ludicrous ‘theory of the fading of the class struggle,’” “trampled on the propositions of Leninism,” “Trotskyite rabble,” and so on). The avalanche of insults raining down on the heads of dead opponents is equal only to the “logical aggression” of the *Short Course* toward the reader. This is the reverse side of “historical explanations”: if in “historical logic” we turn out to be at the dead end of “objectivity,” then here we are

at the dead end of “subjectivity.” The author is a stranger to irony. Sarcasm is a fitting opposition to heroics: “Zinoviev and Kamenev ventured forth with the assertion that the victory of socialism in the USSR was impossible because of the country’s technical and economic backwardness, but they soon found it prudent to hide under cover.... Driven to the wall, Zinoviev and Kamenev preferred to vote for this resolution. But the party knew that they had only postponed their struggle” (263; 275).

We have once more returned to the image of “the party” as a person—a transparent euphemism for Stalin the narrator. How does he appear before us in the pages of the *Short Course* devoted to conspirators’ actions? As a giant, wielding unprecedented power; as the master of a great power, for whom everything consists of service and who can play God with the life of his subordinates at his own discretion, having only to “lift a finger.” The leader stands before us in the “self-glorifying passages” (as they are generally considered) not so much in all his might as in all his anger. We will mention only one “lyrical digression,” following the story of Bukharin’s trial:

These White Guard pigmies, whose strength was no more than that of a gnat, apparently flattered themselves that they were the masters of the country, and imagined that it was really in their power to sell or give away the Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Far East.

These White Guard insects forgot that the real masters of the Soviet country were the Soviet people, and that the Rykovs, Bukharins, Zinovievs, and Kamenevs were only temporary employees of the state, which could at any moment sweep them out from its offices as so much useless rubbish.

These contemptible lackeys of the fascists forgot that the Soviet people had only to lift a finger, and not a trace of them would remain.

The Soviet court sentenced the Bukharin-Trotsky fiends to be shot.

The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs carried out the sentence.

The Soviet people approved the annihilation of the Bukharin-Trotsky gang and passed on to next business.

And the next business was to prepare for the election of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and to carry it out in an organized way. (332; 347–48)

Note here the telegraphic style in which the leader-victor (he is “the party”; he is also “the state” and “the people”) tells the story of what occurred, and

refers to “next business” (such references appear in the text not infrequently, when the opposition is mentioned; for example, we are informed of the departure of Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Rykov from Sovnarkom in November 1917 thus: “The Central Committee of the party contemptuously branded them as deserters from the revolution and accomplices of the bourgeoisie, and proceeded with its work” (202; 211).

“Next business” consists, as a rule, of something inessential (such as elections to the Supreme Soviet). The reader should understand from this that the opposition only distracts from “business.” But while “business” is discussed in the *Short Course* without any expressivity, enemies, in contrast, are discussed with enormous passion. This personal component of the *Short Course* makes the reader suspect the narrator of being not only a storyteller, but also a lyricist. It is precisely this “war lyric” by Stalin (the pages of the *Short Course* devoted to enemies) that there appear before us images of Stalin’s mentality, which cannot be revealed more clearly anywhere else: these are the innermost pages of Stalin’s legacy.

For example, how does the leader picture the “Soviet man”? The answer to this should be sought not in grandiose speeches about “*La Grande Nation*,” but here:

Not infrequently former kulaks would betake themselves to districts where they were unknown, and there make their way into the collective farms with the deliberate intention of sabotaging and doing mischief.... Now that their open struggle against the collective farms had failed, they changed their tactics. They laid aside their sawn-off shotguns and posed as innocent, unoffending folk who would not hurt a fly. They pretended to be loyal Soviet citizens. Once inside the collective farms they stealthily carried on their sabotage. They strove to disorganize the collective farms from within, to undermine labor discipline and to muddle the harvest accounts and the records of work performed. It was part of their sinister scheme to destroy the horses of the collective farms by deliberately infecting them with glanders, mange, and other diseases, or disabling them by neglect or other methods, in which they were often successful. They did damage to tractors and farm machinery. (302; 316–17)

Something bigger than the image of a wrecker forces its way into these gloomy fantasies: they pose as “innocent, unoffending folk who would not

hurt a fly, loyal Soviet citizens." This is Stalin's image of "Soviet man"—[someone] "innocent, unoffending, who would not hurt a fly." But if the kulak (and he is also a wrecker) is completely indistinguishable from the "fully Soviet man," then guilt becomes total, and the enemy is concealed within everyone; conspiracy, secrecy, the intentions of "the people" against "the people" are diffused in the very air. In the end, if the kulak is guilty of "pretending" to be a "fully Soviet man," then the "fully Soviet man" is himself guilty of being like a kulak. The always present "next business" of power is the struggle with conspiracy against one's own self.

The space of the *Short Course* is the boundary (between literature and history). It is precisely here that the main events take place—stylistic, generic, narrative transformations. Undoubtedly the grand style of socialist realism arose in many ways under the influence of Stalin's narrative. But before us we have an image not only of socialist realist writing, but of the very level of that writing. When Stalin with his own hand inserted into his biography instead of the phrase "Stalin is the Lenin for today" the variation: "Stalin is the worthy successor to Lenin, or, as they say in the party, Stalin is the Lenin for today," he was acting first and foremost as a writer, replacing a simple slogan with a kind of "situation" of its utterance. The "situation" became "realistic"; one could imagine members of the party saying to each other "Stalin is the Lenin for today." Ironically in this respect, at the Twentieth Congress ("You can see how well it was said, not by the people, but by Stalin himself"), Khrushchev did not see the "realism."

Meanwhile, there are more than a few such "situations" in the *Short Course*: "When Guchkov ended his speech with the words, 'Long live Emperor Michael,' the workers demanded that Guchkov be immediately arrested and searched. 'Horseradish is no sweeter than radish,' they exclaimed indignantly" (174; 181). This is how workers talked to one another ("indignantly"!)—about "horseradish" and "radish." It is as worth believing in such picture as it is in a socialist realist text: "the workers and soldiers had begun to desert the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries en masse, contemptuously styling them 'social-jailers.' Workers and soldiers belonging to the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties were tearing up their membership cards in anger and disgust and applying for admission to the Bolshevik Party!" (188; 196). This is how workers talked to one another ("contemptuously!"): "social-jailers...."

One peculiarity of Stalinist “realism” consists in the fact that real motifs of social phenomena are carefully hidden in it. When it comes to issues of “concreteness,” (aside from “horseradish and radish”) the magic of the *Short Course*, which was fully apprehended and assimilated by Soviet literature, is incarnated: people here carry out certain actions, the concreteness of which is impossible to explain. For example, we are told that during the February Revolution, “The workers and soldiers who had risen in revolt began to arrest tsarist ministers and generals and to free revolutionaries from jail.... When the news of the victory of the revolution in Petrograd spread to other towns and to the front, the workers and soldiers everywhere began to depose the tsarist officials” (169; 176). It is not easy to picture how workers could arrest ministers, and although these are perfectly concrete actions, how they began to “depose” tsarist officials everywhere is absolutely impossible to imagine: “depose” is a substitute verb for description of certain concrete actions which are unnamed—for only one conceivable reason: they simply did not take place.

Something similar happens in the description of the course of the February Revolution itself: “The Kornilov affair made it clear to the broad masses of the peasantry that if the landlords and generals succeeded in smashing the Bolsheviks and the Soviets, they would next attack the peasantry. The mass of the poor peasants therefore began to rally closer to the Bolsheviks. As to the middle peasants,... after the rout of Kornilov they definitely began to swing toward the Bolshevik Party” (193; 202). Without touching now on questions of how the Kornilov affair, that unsuccessful attempt at a coup d’état, could reverberate on the “mood of the peasantry,” we will turn to the “substitute” constructions: precisely what do “rally closer” and “definitely swing” mean? This can “definitely” only mean that the action here is being described according to a familiar principle: “were bound to appear”—“and actually did appear.” In this context it is absolutely unimportant whether something “appeared” or not; if it was “bound to” that means it “actually” did.

The image of historical intentionality is the most powerful impulse to historical fantasizing. Strictly speaking, Stalin’s entire historical conception turns out to be the true domain of images of reality “in its revolutionary development.” Therefore, reading in a Soviet kolkhoz novel about the “prosperous life of the collective farmers,” we have to remember that the

origins of these pictures lie not in the tendency of Soviet writers to lie, but in the meta-text of all socialist realist literature: "The collective farms had become prosperous. It was now the chief concern of the household of a collective farmer to build new granaries and storehouses, inasmuch as the old storage places, which were designed for a meager annual supply, no longer met even one-tenth of the household's requirements" (325; 340). This hyperbole ("even one-tenth") was also a product of "ready-made history," which becomes a universal master key to reality, ever producing newer and newer images of it.

Published in 1938, the *Short Course* became an epilogue to the "great terror." Stalin wrote the book at the same time as the execution lists, on which the names of all the possible participants in and witnesses to his history turned up. This simultaneity allows us to suggest that this book itself was in its way the basis for the great terror: for the *Short Course* to be published, all its characters had to die, history had to be silent and deserted. In other words, they had to become "material" for the book, sacrifices to it. In this sense the *Short Course* is, perhaps, the most blood-stained book in world history. It was in itself the aim of the terror.

Being the outcome of the Stalinist revolution, the *Short Course* substituted itself for everything that had come before. It is not simply words about history, but history itself. As if the past has burnt down. Everything. To the ground. This effect of historical "conflagration," taking the past with it, having transformed it into ashes, itself creates the illusion of history: "The conflagration, taking away something that has become permanent, creates an illusion of contact with the course of history; creation is identified with destruction. In fact, the destroyed cultural-historical/cultural-spatial milieu leaves in the consciousness an ideal surrogate of movement, which is taken for history, and then the world of finite things is transformed into a raw appendage, passive material for a pseudohistorical perspective.... Having found himself at the site of the fire, man is doomed to a recurring search for a language consisting of a fantastical blend by chance of cultural-historical recollections that have stuck in the memory and deformed new growth."²⁷

²⁷ Belyi, *Tainy podpol'nogo cheloveka*, 101–2.

This is why we have simultaneously before us both a mechanism for *writing* the new history and a mechanism for *erasing* the memory. These two processes are not contradictory. They are united as an aim and a means, as a cause and a result. The transformation of the past into history structures the collective “memory” (if not creates it), aesthetically shapes “reality,” which in its fluidity has no value. But only having become a part of history, acquiring in it a “place,” a “logical” basis and, finally, having been “shaped” as a narrative, having been definitively derealized, the past is transformed into a complete artistic image with its own value.

Glovin’skii explains the fact that the version of 1938 became the “sole and definitive version” thus:

The preservation and inviolability of the first version emphasizes the mythologic character of the text. New episodes can be introduced into myth, but a sequel to the main story cannot as a rule be added to myth. Such additions would destroy the narrative structure of the work, which has been worked out in such a way that the time of writing coincides with the end of days, which endows the entire preceding events with meaning.²⁸

But, strangely, the Stalin biography (also a myth) had a sequel. And not only a sequel: in 1947 the “second edition, revised and expanded,” was published. Be that as it may, it is a question neither of myth, nor even of the “master plot.”

Simply put, the *Short Course*, as distinct from the Stalin (auto)biography, was conceived as a historical monument. Above all as a monument (a peculiar epitaph to the victims of the terror?). Myth may be added to (it is worth remembering that Soviet historical mythology was added to not only after 1938, but also after Stalin, after Khrushchev, and during the Brezhnev era). A monument cannot be added to. It is self-sufficient. The literary work is self-sufficient. It cannot be added to independently of what later “happened” in reality, since “reality” is irrelevant to it. This is “artistic reality.” The narrator himself betrays his concern that it is clear that the text really is entirely completed and enclosed. After the six-fold repetition in the final apotheosis of the construction, “the history of the

²⁸ Glovin’skii, “Ne puskat’ proshlogo na samotek,” 158.

party teaches us that..." a locking of the frame occurs which is surprising in a book (and even more so in a history). After the end of the narrative we have in the middle of the final line:

The End.

And this is the full stop to the monument (like "Amen"). From this "end" by rights this "history" could be begun again, if this epic narrative, apparently victorious over time itself in its totalizing completeness, turns out not to be itself integrated into history. What is left is: style, narratorial technique, the narrator's strategy (optics), and the image of the author—power.

What is left, in other words, is literature.

Adolf Hitler (1889–1945)

Excerpt from *Mein Kampf* (1924)

The knights of the pen and the literary snobs of today ought to realize that the great reformations which have taken place in this world were never conducted by a goose quill.

The task of the pen must always be that of presenting the theoretical concepts which motivate such changes. The force which has always set in motion the great historical avalanches of religious and political movements is the magic power of the spoken word.

The broad masses of a population are more susceptible to the appeal of rhetoric than to any other force. All great movements are popular movements.

They are the volcanic eruptions of human passions and emotions, stirred into activity by the ruthless goddess of Adversity or by the torch of the spoken word cast into the midst of the people.

In no case have great movements been set afoot by the syrupy effusions of aesthetic *litterateurs* and drawing room heroes.¹

¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf: The Stalag Edition: The Only Complete and Officially Authorised English Translation Ever Issued*. Translated by an unknown NSDAP Member (Ostara Publications, 2014), 121–22, http://tohno-chan.com/ddl/src/Mein_Kampf_-_Hitler_Adolf.pdf (January 13, 2016).

Ideology in Execution: On Hitler's *Mein Kampf*

ALBRECHT KOSCHORKE

Let me preface this essay with three theses. Thesis one: The culture of the book found its ultimate, hypertrophic expression in twentieth-century totalitarianism. As documented in this volume, many twentieth-century dictators were active as writers, and some based their despotic rule on what can properly be called a cult of the book. As different as the works of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and Muammar al-Gaddafi are in style and ideology, the bibliocentric orientation of their regimes is something they have in common. In simplified, ideal-typical terms, we may speak of *the* book as the symbolic center of the totalitarian system. It forms the sacral center of a state propaganda that otherwise employs more modern media: radio, film, and television. The book is given out to party cadres, even to the entire population, and assumes the character of a constitutional document; at a minimum, it is endowed with an authority to which tribute must be paid in the regime's public displays and within its power networks.

The book's guiding idea is to provide a durable foundation for a political formation that has emerged from the tumultuous events of war and revolution and is extremely precarious when it comes to legitimacy and stability. Consequently, the book serves a quasi-religious function and is meant to inherit the mantle of the holy books of the great world religions. This explains the tension between, on the one hand, the use of technical and industrial media by the regime's propaganda and, on the other, the archaizing rituals carried out around the sacral book, blending bibliophilic splendor, fetishism, talismanic touching, and other forms of magical performance in a peculiar syndrome. The most recent example of this genre is the *Ruhnama* of Saparmyrat Niyazov, the former leader of Turkmenistan.

It was meant to found the national identity of the Turkmen people. Read on television and at official events, it was the sole reading material in the country's schools and universities for years—a book to which a gigantic statue has been erected in the capital. There is even a copy that circles the globe in a space capsule.²

The second thesis is that foundational works of this kind are understood by dictators as essential to the task of cleansing that breaks with the past and simultaneously reinvents it in an autocratic manner, but also responds to a present that appears confused and anchorless with a rigorous, ultimately terroristic, will to order. To this extent, an imagination of disorder is inscribed within the text and constitutes its driving force. The insight that terror and catharsis, fear and purification, are closely connected, not only in the tragedies of antiquity but also in modern ideologies of power, is of central importance for studying the motivational structure of their protagonists. This holds true irrespective of the well-known ironic fate of dictators, who in the medium term ordinarily only increase the chaos that they pretend to oppose—and, in the end, fall victim themselves to the increasingly chaotic spiral.

The third thesis has to do with the character of the imposition of order by the dictatorial book, and thus with how ideology as a whole functions. Here it is necessary to differentiate between *content* and *gesture*, on the one hand, and between the diverse circles to which totalitarian writing is addressed, on the other. The dictators' holy books claim to provide their followers with meaning-laden orientation, but closer semantic analysis shows them to be exceedingly inconsistent and eclectic. Thus it is necessary to consider other factors to explain their impact. These include the *ritual status* of the book, which is declared the foundation of the respective system of rule and is thus, as is often the case with religious texts, rendered immune to a demystifying critique of its contents. The *particular terms of reception of the book medium* must also be taken into account: only a few people, at best, read it from beginning to end; others are familiar only with excerpts or quotations that are in circulation. As a result, several concentric circles of initiates and a political priesthood are formed, whose representatives are further distinguished from the mass of nonreaders and

² See the contribution of Riccardo Nicolosi in this book.

assume the role of mentors toward that group. While mass propaganda in modern guise, in principle, addresses everyone at the same time and under the same conditions, around the book there is created a system of partial symbolic participation that allows multiple gradations and the resulting opportunities for correspondingly varying levels of distinction. This situation helps explain why the often-confused character of cultic books of this kind fails to derogate their authority. On the contrary, the following rule of thumb can be proposed: the darker and more ambiguous the phraseology of the authority-founding book, the more easily it can be absorbed through selective usage, and the greater the internal latitude among the interest groups that form in response to its call. A correspondingly great significance is accorded to the *gestural signals* that accompany and are disseminated by the dictatorial text—directed less toward the uninitiated than toward the circle of more elect potential elites of the new regime.

The first dictatorial book of the twentieth century is Adolf Hitler's programmatic text *Mein Kampf*. Unlike later representatives of the same genre, this book has had an impact far outlasting the regime it helped found. It continues to have a remarkably divided reception. On the one hand, it is still considered to be highly infectious. The ban on reprinting *Mein Kampf* in Germany expires only this year. Even the preemptive publication of a scholarly edition, complete with commentary and designed to neutralize the danger of ideological contamination, like a cordon sanitaire, led to fierce public controversy.³ It is not difficult, though, to acquire copies of the original version on the used book market, or online. Outside Germany, the book has remained a long seller of considerable reach. In Turkey, Egypt, India, and other countries, it is reprinted again and again and sells many copies. On the other hand, academic readers, if they even go to the trouble of reading Hitler's hodgepodge, unanimously report how boring, unoriginal, bloviating, stylistically mangled, driveling to the point of embarrassment, and altogether laughable they find the book. This sort of reaction already existed in the 1920s; at that time it encouraged, fatally,

³ Cf. the interview with employees of the Münchner Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Christian Staas, "Hitlers 'Mein Kampf': 'Wir drehen den Zünder raus,'" *Die Zeit*, 26 September 2013 *Die Zeit*, 6 October 2013, <http://www.zeit.de/2013/40/hitler-mein-kampf-kritische-edition-ifz-bayern> (January 13, 2016).

the confident assumption that the author of such a book had no political future.⁴ The mystery of how this text could ever have generated a considerable resonance and might even win over contemporary readers (and why nevertheless legal and editorial cautionary measures are taken) is all the greater. But what, then, could be the source of the power of fascination emitted by Hitler's polemic, which was so disastrously effective? To whom is it addressed, and why? The collected evidence of its reception is limited to agreement or disagreement with the views presented by Hitler.⁵ Readers either praise his powerfully authentic style or accuse him of assuming the pretensions of a great author, who, in a state of exalted semi-ignorance, spews out confused fantasies of hatred. For greater acuity of psychological depth, we must therefore rely on our own analysis of the text and the signals it sends. This text should not be reduced to an ideological message directed at all readers equally—any more than we should assume a homogeneous readership in the first place. To what diverse readers' expectations, then, does Hitler's book respond? What processes of inclusion does he employ, alongside the propagandistic line of attack? Whom does he "invite in," and who is "not admitted"? What signals is he emitting, what kind of attention is awakened, which wishes are satisfied?

One clue points to the narrative orchestration of the first part of *Mein Kampf*. In a key passage, Hitler addresses his relationship with the social democrats. Following the book's general scheme, which resembles a political *Bildungsroman* in the way it amalgamates the unfolding of National Socialist (NS) ideology with a—heavily fictionalized—account of Hitler's own development, the conflict with social democracy is embedded in an episode of the chapter "Years of Study and Suffering in Vienna." Hitler claims that, at the time, he was an unskilled laborer in construction. Pressured by union agitators, so the story goes, he engaged in heated discussions until he was threatened with bodily harm and driven from the construction site. This experience, according to Hitler, was the source of his hatred, or even feelings of disgust, for the social democratic "seducers"

⁴ See Othmar Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches: Adolf Hitlers "Mein Kampf," 1922–1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006). Plöckinger lists a wealth of corresponding opinions from before 1933 (225–28).

⁵ The most comprehensive evidence appears in Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches*.

of the workers.⁶ As soon as Hitler touches on this theme, his tone changes. If, until then, he has described the misery of the Viennese lower classes relatively empathetically and used this to develop a series of sociopolitical demands, now his style shifts to paranoid denunciations. He sees a “villainous poisoner” at work, namely, the Red press (*MK*, 42), from which it was necessary to protect the misled people (*Volk*); he discerns a “veritable barrage of lies and slanders” raining down on their political opponents and says that he is in favor of “combating poison gas with poison gas” (*MK*, 43–44). Then comes a passage in italics: “*Terror at the place of employment, in the factory, in the meeting hall and on the occasion of demonstrations will always be successful unless opposed by equal terror*” (*MK*, 44). The reader who has concluded an “autobiographical pact” with the writer Hitler,⁷ and who reads *Mein Kampf* as the description of a political life’s journey, will be struck by the disproportion between the purported occasion (political argument on the construction site) and the reaction (poison gas fantasy). But it is possible to identify reasons why Hitler unleashes his first hate-filled tirade at this particular spot. For one thing, he has to cover up an autobiographical counterfeit. As Brigitte Hamann has convincingly put forward, there are no indications that the young Hitler—physically frail and awkward as he was—ever did hard physical labor.⁸ The story about the union strong-arming on the scaffolding is a lying fairy tale cribbed from the right-wing nationalist press. Whatever knowledge of social democracy Hitler possessed was acquired by excessive reading of newspapers and brochures, and his political fights during that time were limited to agitated monologues in the male dormitory (*HV*, 141–47).

A second reason for Hitler’s hatred of social democracy is political in nature. Remembering the hardships of his Vienna period, Hitler thanks

⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). Hereafter cited as *MK*.

⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

⁸ Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler’s Vienna: A Dictator’s Apprenticeship*, trans. Thomas Thornton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 142–43. Hereafter cited as *HV*. In German, *Hitlers Wien: Lehrjahre eines Diktators*, 3rd ed. (Munich: Piper, 1996). For a different reconstruction of the Viennese period, see the older description by Werner Maser, *Adolf Hitlers “Mein Kampf”: Geschichte, Auszüge, Kommentare*, 6th ed. (Esslingen: Bechtle, 1981).

fate for “hurling me, despite all resistance, into a world of misery and poverty, this making me acquainted with those for whom I was later to fight” (MK, 21). The social problems, he writes, were not solvable through condescending good deeds; rather, it was necessary to attack the “basic deficiencies in the organization of our economic and cultural life” from the ground up (MK, 30). The list of his demands, beginning with the improvement of living conditions and schooling, is consonant with many social reform-oriented approaches of the period. To this extent, one can discover in Hitler programmatic commonalities with the hated social democrats. When it comes to techniques for leading the masses, there are also passages that read like a mirror—in reverse. The masses, in a telling paragraph, resemble “the woman” (*das Weib*), who “would rather bow to a strong man than dominate a weakling” and who therefore are not even aware of their “shameless spiritual terrorization” (MK, 41–42). The “brutality” of an uncompromising theory, of which Hitler here accuses the social democrats, is something he will adopt as his own precept. In all this, Hitler, the son of a bureaucrat who had risen into the bourgeoisie, manifests a deeply schismatic image of the lower social strata. As the formless, blind “mass” that tends toward insurgency, they are the object of hatred and contempt at the same time that he idealizes them as the nation (*Volk*). And this is precisely the moment that brings him into sharp opposition to the Social Democratic Party platform. For, unlike the Marxian concept of class, the *Volk*, in Hitler, is conceived as an ethnic-national unit from the start. The result is two radically different determinations of the political conflict situation. The division into classes sees social battles as being waged between above and below; the result is an internationalist stance in which the international of workers stands in opposition to the international of capital. Where here society breaks along a horizontal fracture, nationalism—especially in the biological extreme form favored by Hitler—draws a vertical line of separation. From the national perspective, all members of a people are related in essential ways. To divide them internally would be a betrayal of this shared essence. The members of another people, on the contrary, are in principle alien. To make common cause with them would also be a betrayal—of the necessary loyalty toward one’s own nation.

Schematically compared in this way, socialism and nationalism represent two irreconcilable models of inclusion and exclusion. The person who de-

cides between them relinquishes a portion of his or her political potential: either in favor of a *völkisch* program that, in a multiethnic state like Austria, gets bogged down in political conflicts, neglects the priority of the social question, and misses the opportunity to win broad political popularity; or as a social party that hesitates to place its bets fully and firmly on the national card. In the party landscape of Austria, Hitler had both alternatives before him—in the form of all-German and Christian-social parties.⁹

The program of the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei; NSDAP), at which *Mein Kampf* is aimed, is based on the wager that the book can reach its audience with *both* promises, the national one *and* the social one, in the same breath. From the electorate's perspective, this is the equivalent of wooing both the nationalistically inclined petite bourgeoisie, with its reflexive protectionism and xenophobia, and the working class, with its susceptibility to slogans of class struggle.

Sociologically, this corresponds precisely to Hitler's own evolution as the product of a petit bourgeois family that has made good and to the posture he assumes in *Mein Kampf*, of sharing the fate of the simple *Volk* during his years of poverty and adversity while remaining scrupulously aloof. The canard of having once belonged to the army of the employed while, through intensive study, becoming the only individual capable of penetrating the overarching political context, predestines him as the mentor, indeed the guardian, of the workers. The *Führer* role, with its mixture of populist communitarian pathos and authoritarian disdain for the masses, is already portended here.

In the words of Hannah Arendt, when Hitler's program "offered a synthesis supposed to lead to national unity, a semantic solution whose double trademark of 'German' and 'Worker' connected the nationalism of the right with the internationalism of the left, [it] stole the political contents of all other parties."¹⁰ This applies, above all, to social democracy, which, as a consequence of this ideological maneuver, appeared not only as a po-

⁹ Cf. Barbara Zehnfpennig, *Hitlers "Mein Kampf": Eine Interpretation* (Munich: Fink, 2000), 76–77.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 357. Hereafter cited as *OT*.

litical opponent on the opposite end of the spectrum but also, in several respects, as a rival on the same terrain.¹¹ The problem lay less in the contradictory nature of the relationship than in the—propagandistically unfavorable—overlapping of some political concerns of social democracy and National Socialism. How does Hitler, from his perspective, establish the necessary sharp ideological distinction? The answer can be gleaned from the narrative structure of *Mein Kampf*. For, immediately following the exploration of the social question, Hitler develops his anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. The struggle for the position of advocate for the masses—from his perspective—is a battle on extremely narrow terrain. Everything depends on snatching the advocate's role from the grasp of socialist agitators and forming it in accordance with *völkisch* principles. In a rivalry on such limited ground, this is not possible without the instrument of demonization. The demon of nationalism is the person who does not fit into the schema of the national: among the racists and sectarian *Volk* ideologues around 1900, on whose writings Hitler draws to create his eclectic weltanschauung, this person is the Jew. (Other opponents, for example, Catholics, who were loyal to Rome and to this extent anti-German, were not considered primarily for tactical reasons.¹²)

In accordance with the maxim that the objections of the public must be refuted preemptively,¹³ Hitler describes his “transformation into an anti-Semite” as the story of a difficult internal struggle, the virtual equivalent of

¹¹ This is made most clear in a later passage that refers to the period World War I period: “The more I [Hitler] occupied myself with the idea of a necessary change in the government's attitude toward social democracy as the momentary embodiment of Marxism, the more I recognized the lack of a serviceable substitute for this doctrine. What would be given the masses, if, just supposing, social democracy had been broken? There was not one movement in existence which could have been expected to succeed in drawing into its sphere of influence the great multitudes of workers grown more or less leaderless” (MK, 173).

¹² Cf. Zehnppennig, *Hitlers “Mein Kampf,”* 76–77.

¹³ It is expedient, writes Hitler, in a chapter on the “significance of the spoken word” in the second part of *Mein Kampf*, “always” to raise the possible objections oneself, immediately, and prove their untenability; in this way the listener, even stuffed full of half-taught objections, but otherwise possessed of an honest heart, is won over more easily through the preemptive removal of the doubts that have been impressed on his mind. The half-learned stuff is automatically overturned and one's attention more and more attracted by the “presentation” (MK, 523).

a religious conversion (*MK*, 51–61). It has cost him effort, he declares, to overcome his initially tolerant attitude in religious matters, which led him to take umbrage at the anti-Jewish campaigns in the press. Again and again, he says, he had “relapses” (*MK*, 56). But once the battle against tolerance, humanitarian considerations, and good taste has been won, the Jewish world conspiracy provides a phantasm that fills each and every gap in his line of argument. By identifying Marxism as the core element of this world conspiracy, he can anoint himself the savior of Germany and pursue all the more rigorously the project of annexing its people via *weltanschauung*: “*Only a knowledge of the Jews provides the key with which to comprehend the inner, and consequently real, aims of social democracy*” (*MK*, 51).

Like all conspiracy theories, this one, too, is difficult to grasp. To anyone who is not involved, it appears so obviously abstruse as to be unworthy of serious consideration. In addition, it possesses a built-in mechanism that makes it resistant to falsification: anyone who attempts to disprove it can be accused of having fallen into the trap of the Jewish world press and thus inadvertently affording proof of the theory's validity. In this way, it insulates itself from the outer world and closes itself off internally. For followers of the movement, its attractiveness lies precisely in this, its closed nature, which both gives them a strong group identity and projects the figure of an enemy. From the perspective of the *Führer*, the call to defy the conspirators is part of a conditional offer of love, in which promise and threat are closely connected: follow my path and allow yourself to be formed into a *Volk* as I imagine it, so I do not have to despise and destroy you.¹⁴

With Hitler's “transformation into an anti-Semite,” which purportedly took place on a Viennese construction site, the ground is prepared for his working through of the trauma of 1918. In chapter 7 of part 1 of *Mein Kampf* he relates his trip to a field hospital after being temporarily blinded in a poison gas attack. Immediately after this episode, he writes: “For a long time there had been something indefinite but repulsive in the air” (*MK*, 202). Here the topic is no longer the use of poison gas in warfare

¹⁴ On this “love contract” of modern dictators with their people, see Albrecht Kossorke, “Taten aus Worten: Über den fiktiven Kern von Gewaltherrschaft,” in *Dichter und Lenker: Die Literatur der Staatsmänner, Päpste und Despoten von der frühen Neuzeit bis in die Gegenwart*, ed. Patrick Ramponi and Saskia Wiedner (Tübingen: Francke, 2014), 33–48.

but—joined by a metonymic bridge—the revolutionary activities on the home front. The defender of the fatherland is unprepared for the actual catastrophe, namely, the capitulation: “And then one day, suddenly and unexpectedly, the calamity descended” (*MK*, 202). Hitler salvages his image of the German people by ascribing the revolution to “a few Jewish youths” (*MK*, 202). He views the kaiser as having been betrayed by the “leaders of Marxism” (*MK*, 206). Although he describes the kaiser as weak, he leaves the kaiser’s authority intact. All the energies of denial, instead, are directed toward the real, inner enemy: “There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard: either or” (*MK*, 206).

Hitler’s polemic comes entwined in the frequently recirculated legend that despite its mass distribution in schools, libraries, and as an obligatory gift during marriage ceremonies, *Mein Kampf* remained an unread, because unreadable, book.¹⁵ This is worth remarking on inasmuch as Hitler, in his foreword, turns “not ... to strangers, but to those adherents of the movement who belong to it with their hearts” (*MK*, n.p.). Five hundred pages later, in the second volume, he expounds candidly on the fact that “the mass of people as such is lazy,” does not read books, and in any case has only a very short attention span (*MK*, 470 et passim). Anyone who has stuck with him this far may therefore count himself among the elect, whose understanding comes at the expense of others. This coincides with Arendt’s remark that totalitarian regimes are organized according to the model of secret societies and operate with a finely tuned system of participation (*OT*, 376–78). As for National Socialist ideology, its point lies in openly displaying, to anyone who knew how to read, not only its public, *völkisch*, side but also, to an astonishing extent, the arcana of its techniques of power.

For even the application of propagandistic means is explored with complete candor—contradicting the widespread assumption that ideologies function only by hiding the means by which they are made. The text of

¹⁵ On the dissemination of the book, by contrast, see the detailed information in Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches*, 424–28; and Christian Alexander Braun and Christiane Friederike Marxhausen, “Adolf Hitlers *Mein Kampf*: Herrschaftssymbol, Herrschaftsinstrument, Medium ideologischer Kommunikation,” in *Despoten dichten. Sprachkunst und Gewalt*. ed. Albrecht Koschorke and Konstantin Kaminskij (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2011), 179–209.

Mein Kampf is designed in such a way that it can be read on two levels. Page after page, it expatiates on Marxist intrigue and Jewish parasitism, feeding the same primitively ideological reading hunger that will be fueled, only a few years later, by Julius Streicher's newspaper *Der Stürmer*. To this extent, *Mein Kampf* is legible as a testament to blind racial delusion.¹⁶ Yet, as discussed above, Hitler does not present himself from the start as a fanatical Jew hater, but instead emphasizes that his anti-Semitism was the result of a learning process. In this point, by the way, his description accords with historical research, even if Hitler does backdate the event of his "turn": there are no anti-Semitic remarks attributed to him during his Vienna period. He invokes this particular register for the first time when he speaks in Munich, in pubs, that is, after his decision during the turning point 1918/19 to "go into politics" (*MK*, 206).¹⁷

Why did Hitler, who is so fond of presenting even his earliest decisions as "unshakable," and who continuously undermines the principle of development intrinsic to autobiography by asserting that he has changed none of his essential positions—why did Hitler not invent a "rock solid" and "granite hard" opinion about world Jewry from the very beginning? One reason, as suggested above, surely lies in the fact that he considered it more psychologically effective to meet his readers at the point of whatever fellow

¹⁶ This is the tendency of most treatments. Cf., e.g., Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). Fest characterizes Hitler's hatred of Jews as "a pathological mania," but without denying "the propaganda value of his anti-Semitism" (211).

¹⁷ Ian Kershaw sees Hitler's own version as shaped by tactical considerations, specifically, by his need, after the failed putsch, to rewrite himself with the help of a specific image, the self-portrait "of the nobody who struggled from the first against adversity, and, rejected by the academic 'establishment,' taught himself through painstaking study, coming—above all through his own bitter experiences—to unique insights into politics and society that enabled him without assistance at the age of around twenty to formulate a rounded 'world view.' This unchanged 'world view,' he was saying in 1924, provided him with the claim to the leadership of the national movement and indeed with the claim to be Germany's coming 'great leader.'... An admission that he had become an ideological antisemite [sic] only after the war, as he lay blinded from mustard gas in a hospital in Pasewalk and heard of Germany's defeat and the revolution, would certainly have sounded less heroic and would also have smacked of hysteria" (Kershaw, *Hitler*, 65).

feeling remained rather than confront them with a ready-made dogma.¹⁸ In the early phase of a radical movement, it is always necessary to take the skepticism of the not yet wholly converted into account. But the strategic placement of his story about converting to anti-Semitism suggests a second reading of his book connected less with ideology itself than with its *technical production*. Here I should comment on the circumstances surrounding the writing of *Mein Kampf*. Although rumors of coauthorship by individuals in his immediate circle were widespread, Hitler wrote the majority of the book himself.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is not, as is often claimed, the product of individual creativity. For one thing, the typed manuscript was reworked as it made its way into print. Typically, and at some cost to the work's overall style, the changes reintroduced oral elements into the text.²⁰ For another thing, the early morning writings of the inhabitant of Landsberg Prison, as he sat at his typewriter, were by no means exclusively his own creation. Hitler puts on paper what has proved successful in *völkisch* circles. Even his propagandistic profile is not his own but something he has developed under the influence and with the support and schooling of the Bavarian Reichswehr, his employer in the immediate postwar period.²¹ That Hitler's ideological fanaticism is based on personal opportunism is naturally something he is compelled to deny in *Mein Kampf*. What he does openly emphasize is the strategic character of the ideology whose speaker he declares himself to be. As a result, Hitler's reflections on his Vienna years serve two quite different purposes: they obscure and mystify his much later and much less laudable "call" to become a political agitator, and they demonstrate in an almost textbooklike manner, for the benefit of political adherents and allies, how it is possible to develop concepts with potential mass effectiveness by focusing them on a

¹⁸ How accurately Hitler caught the psychology of his future supporters is documented by the autobiographical report of a young female National Socialist who underwent a similar process from humanist qualms to racist conviction. Cited in Claudia Koonz, *Mütter im Vaterland: Frauen im Dritten Reich* (Freiburg: Kore, 1991), 79.

¹⁹ Cf. Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches*, 121–53.

²⁰ "The oratorical style of the book was evidently introduced only after the fact" (ibid., 72).

²¹ This disproves the legend of Hitler's originary charisma. Cf. Ludolf Herbst, *Hitlers Charisma: Die Erfindung eines deutschen Messias* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2010), 109.

single point and holding fast to them “unwaveringly,” “with iron steadfastness,” and with all the other familiar adverbial modifiers. *Mein Kampf* is structured to relate the disagreement with the social democrats to the examination of the “Jewish question” as problem and solution.

In its treatment of this key theme, the text constructs a kind of two-story structure. Its ideological message claims that the eradication of Judaism, which—conspiracy theories are confusing for nonadepts—is simultaneously supposed to be the driving force of capital and the force behind the anticapitalism of the working class, will put an end to the class struggle. But from the viewpoint of party tactics, another aspect is foregrounded: the demonization of a political rival, who in advancing similar sociopolitical measures claims the same role of a representative of the broad masses as Hitler and his movement. The narrative design of *Mein Kampf* is transparent in this tactical context, something that probably attracted the notice of his more politically schooled readers. At this level of textual signal, attention is paid less to the *what* of ideology than to the *how* of its propagandistic contrivance.

There are many indications that Hitler's primary interest lay in appealing to followers drawn to the construction of power. For them, *Mein Kampf* has the character of a manual, and this is also how it was understood.²² The orientation to the practical aspect of power emerges from the choice of the medium of the book, which, Hitler thought, required an effort that limited its reach to a restricted circle of like-minded people. Actual propaganda—Hitler left no doubt about this—takes place in speech making. Only an orator, he thought, has the reactions of his public immediately in view and can adjust his rhetoric accordingly, “until at length even the last group of an opposition, by its very bearing and facial expression, enables him to recognize its capitulation to his arguments”; only oral speech, not written indoctrination, was capable of overcoming the “resistance of the emotions” (*MK*, 471).

²² A publication from 1935, for example, claims: “As the basis of every activity of public speaking, it was and is still self-evident to use the bible of National Socialism: Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Anyone who was once inclined to falter in struggle drew new strength and new courage from his political bible” (quoted in Braun and Marxhausen, “Adolf Hitlers *Mein Kampf*,” 201).

In themselves, these reflections are not very original. But when Hitler declares that the effect of the agitator's speech is the sole measure of its "truth," he sharpens them to a point that has important consequences. A longer passage on the subject is revealing:

All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to. Consequently, the greater the mass it is intended to reach, the lower its purely intellectual level will have to be.... The more modest its intellectual ballast, the more exclusively it takes into consideration the emotions of the masses, the more effective it will be. And this is the best proof of the soundness or unsoundness of a propaganda campaign, and not success in pleasing a few scholars or young aesthetes. (*MK*, 190)

Correspondence with the facts, differentiation, level or quality, "considerations of humanitarianism and beauty" (*MK*, 178)—all the guiding values of cultivated bourgeois-academic discourse are declared irrelevant, ridiculed, and dismissed as a complacent, specialized world of noneffective communication. The antiacademic tone, with its contempt for the "scientifically trained intelligentsia" (*MK*, 179), is not original either. Hitler shares it with the colorful group of *völkisch* sectarians around 1900, whose writings he drew on and who formed an autodidactic-megalomaniac counter-world to that of the professional academics. According to the credo of the "theoreticians of race and explainers of the world,"²³ scientific accuracy in the conventional sense is not what matters. Thus they render their home-made idea construct immune to the objections of academic experts. Whatever serves the mental encapsulation of *weltanschauung*-driven sects and their leaders' closest circles can be struck into populist coin when it meets with broader resonance; it can be used to support a broad-brush political ideology that does not need to bother about falsification, as long as its mass effectiveness does not suffer as a result. For if the correctness or incorrectness of a given propaganda is measured only by its success, then it closes itself off in a tautological circle of self-verification: people believe it because it presents itself as the only truth, and it is true because the masses believe

²³ This is the title of the relevant, very instructive chapter in Hamann, *HV*.

it. Here a factor comes into play that is underestimated by those who see nothing at work in demagoguery but error, blindness, or delusion and who therefore attempt to come to terms with it through reasoned disagreement. To this enlightenment confidence, it is necessary to respond that the demagogue, together with his followers, knows very well what he is doing. He makes his assertions not *in spite of* the fact that in doing so he incites a negative reaction from all reasonable people but *because* he can be certain that in this way he will provoke. The reflexive outrage that he unleashes does not shatter him; it affords him a kind of contemptuous elation. Propaganda—Hitler states this quite openly—is means to an end. It should make “everyone ... convinced that the fact is real” (*MK*, 180), and consequently excludes any academic investigation of its pros and cons. Its “very first precondition,” Hitler says, is “the basically subjective and one-sided attitude ... toward every question it deals with” (*MK*, 182). Hitler’s rhetoric, it is true, does not entirely abandon truth as a value to be invoked,²⁴ but in the context of his writing as a whole, it is a secondary factor that derives from the power of his own speech and is originated in circular fashion through the success of its pure assertion.²⁵

When it comes to the propagandistic production of truth through speech, Hitler’s thought figure is circular, too. The agitator, as Hitler represents him, stands in direct connection to the feelings of the masses he is haranguing and seeks to absorb their emotional upsurges. We can well imagine how the Hitler of the Munich years tested the guiding principles of his *weltanschauung* rhetorically, gauging their effect until they finally appeared to Hitler himself as creditable truths of the *Volk*. Yet he emphasizes the necessity “of taking a position in important questions of principle against all public opinion when it assumed a false attitude—disregarding

²⁴ The following passage is symptomatic: “It was absolutely wrong to discuss war guilt from the standpoint that Germany alone could not be held responsible for the outbreak of the catastrophe; it would have been correct to load every bit of the blame on the shoulders of the enemy, even if this had not really corresponded to the true facts, as it actually did” (*MK*, 182).

²⁵ See also Josef Kopperschmidt, “Darf einem zu Hitler auch nichts einfallen? Thematisch einleitende Bemerkung,” in *Hitler der Redner*, ed. Josef Kopperschmidt (Munich: Fink, 2003), 11–27. Kopperschmidt describes “rhetorical power” as an “exemplary case of a magnitude that is dependent on agreement” (13).

all consideration of popularity, hatred or struggle.” The party must not be subjugated to public opinion; it must dominate it. In the sexual symbolism characteristic for Hitler, “it must not become a servant to the masses, but their master!” (MK, 464–65). It is therefore a matter of forcibly subduing the auditorium, using the very means of a masterful populism adapted to the “feminine” character of the *Volk* (MK, 201)²⁶—which, moreover, must be protected from the “seducers” on the opposing side.

With his statements about the collective character of the people as female, endowed with little “receptivity,” and notoriously forgetful (MK, 180), Hitler draws the smaller segment of the readership of *Mein Kampf*, which reads on past the more anecdotally and autobiographically shaped early chapters,²⁷ into an exclusive compact among males who count themselves part of a political avant-garde. But this is not the only, and probably not the most important, prize he holds out to those readers who are more responsive to his call. His offer goes even farther: it consists in the inducement of stepping behind the curtain of knowledge about power, in order, coolly and objectively, as a privileged insider, to become part of the creative construction of an ideology Hitler’s text takes advantage of this allure neither with an ironic wink nor with the cynical chuckle of the person who disbelieves his own lies but with the dark flintiness of the decider. Everything depends on the determination with which a person fights for his belief, and this makes the belief itself decisive. Demonstrating that you are undeterred has two sides, one that intimidates and one that invites coconspirators. Hitler was completely aware that his radicalism was polarizing. That he—as he saw it—was separating the wheat from the chaff was a part of his calculus.²⁸ But this does not mean that his core supporters were loyal to their *Führer* purely out of conviction. The grounds of conviction are more like clay to be modeled, and the basic organiza-

²⁶ On Hitler’s sexual symbolism, see Kenneth Burke, “Die Rhetorik in Hitlers ‘Mein Kampf,’” in *Die Rhetorik in Hitlers ‘Mein Kampf’ und andere Essays zur Strategie der Überredung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 10–11.

²⁷ For evidence of the very unequal reception of the different parts of *Mein Kampf*, see Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches*, 429 et passim.

²⁸ E.g., “The more radical and inflammatory my propaganda was, the more this frightened weaklings and hesitant characters and prevented them from penetrating the primary core of our organization” (MK, 586).

tional matrix is constructed according to the various gradations of the will to decisiveness.²⁹ Unity in decisiveness, not blind ideological obedience, was the unifying element among National Socialist actors. It was strong and attractive enough to balance the centrifugal tendencies of a system dominated by intramural skirmishes and rivalries. It could even exist alongside quiet contempt for the *Führer*. The young planning experts of the NS state, in particular, cultivated “a distanced/condescending relationship to Hitler, whom they certainly valued greatly as a mass agitator and organizer, but less so as a political thinker.” This disdain did no harm to the NS system; on the contrary, the elite of “thinkers” (*die Geistigen*), as the radical rightist intellectuals viewed themselves, saw their opportunity, “in light of the weak ideological and theoretical profile of the National Socialist movement,” to put their own stamp on it.³⁰ They could feel secure in the illusion that they were using the *Führer* politically and trumping him ideologically.³¹

In outline, it becomes clear here that precisely the deficits of Hitler's overwrought polemic may have proved useful for the historic success of National Socialism. The “heterogeneous conglomeration” that made up the NS *weltanschauung* was able to give “a lot to a lot of people, to satisfy the most diverse instincts, needs, imaginings, longings.”³² Viewed in this

²⁹ That strength of will contains a tautological moment, to the extent that it is based on will to will, has been explored by Ingo Stöckmann in the broader context of literary developments around 1900: *Der Wille zum Willen: Der Naturalismus und die Gründung der literarischen Moderne, 1880–1900* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).

³⁰ Ulrich Herbert Best: *Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989*, 2nd ed. (Bonn: Dietz, 1996), 107, 104.

³¹ Cf. Karl-Dietrich Bracher, “Voraussetzungen des nationalsozialistischen Aufstiegs,” in *Die Nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung: Studien zur Errichtung des nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystems in Deutschland*, ed. Karl-Dietrich Bracher et al., 2nd ed. (Cologne: Opladen, 1962), 1–27. See also Per Leo, *Der Wille zum Wesen: Weltanschauungskultur, charakterologisches Denken und Judenfeindschaft in Deutschland, 1890–1940* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2013), 16–23. Lutz Rafael demonstrates in concrete terms that the Nazi *weltanschauung* should be understood “as a politically controlled, but intellectually open field of opinions ... that was committed, as its compulsory elements, to no more than a handful of conceptual husks” (“Radikales Ordnungsdenken und die Organisation totalitärer Herrschaft: Weltanschauungseliten und Humanwissenschaftler im NS Regime,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27.1 [2001]: 28).

³² Bracher et al., *Die Nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung*, 22–23.

way, it is not the rhetorically claimed sharp clarity but the program's vagueness that paved the way for the rise of the NSDAP from a small sectarian group to a majority-capable party. If the Nazi ideology operated with a combative vocabulary that was largely empty of content, this very fact offered certain groups an inducement to help out intellectually with their own more precise formulations.³³ Vacuity and decisiveness do not contradict each other; they are complementary.

This message can be gotten from Hitler's polemic, if we pay attention to how it uses language. Thus *Mein Kampf* could be pressed into service, on a secondary level, for training, could offer inducements, without anyone having to believe Hitler's every word. It is less a blind fanaticism than the *enjoyment of words that exert immediate power*, in which Hitler invites the circle of his party insiders to participate; a performative empowerment in rhetorical as well as political registers, which uses all the traditional means of legitimation when they are available but finds its most secret and profound joy in the well-tested groundlessness of its own speech.

That an anti-Semitic attitude, in particular, can be combined with open decisionism is demonstrable in many cases. Hitler's great model in regard to populist animosity to Jews, Vienna's mayor Karl Lueger, is reported to have said, "I determine who's a Jew" (*Wer a Jud ist, bestimm i!*) (HV, 290). In his case, this may be a sign of undisguised political opportunism, of which Lueger is often accused. But similar comments are also found at the heart of NS confessional writings. This is how Joseph Goebbels' autobiographically inspired novel of awakening, *Michael*, solves the problem of how the "Christ-Socialism" (*Christussozialismus*) that Goebbels originally championed can be reconciled with the anti-Semitism he took from Hitler:

Christ cannot have been a Jew. I don't need to give any scientific proof of that. That's the way it is!³⁴

Christ is the genius of love, as such the most diametrical opposite of Judaism, which represents the incarnation of hate. The Jew is a nonrace among the races of the earth....

³³ See also Rafael, "Radikales Ordnungsdenken," 28–37.

³⁴ Joseph Goebbels, *Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*, 17th ed. (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP Franz Eher Nachf., 1942), 58. Hereafter cited as *M*.

Christ is the first seriously important Jew opponent.... Therefore Judaism had to eliminate him. For he shook the foundations of its future world power....

Christ-Socialists: this means voluntarily and gladly doing what the garden variety socialists do out of sympathy or political calculation.

Moral necessities versus political insight.

The battle that we are fighting today, until victory or the bitter end, is in the most profound sense a battle between Christ and Marx.

Christ: the principle of love.

Marx: the principle of hatred. (*M*, 82)

Goebbels' novel is the portrait of a returning war veteran who is unable to adjust to civilian life and is looking for a political-religious awakening. In his biography, as in Hitler's, academic failure becomes part and parcel of a self-image that no longer cares about the objections of scholars or experts.³⁵ Instead, as the essential character trait of the war generation, Goebbels quite succinctly emphasizes "an empty readiness to believe": "The youth of today is more alive than ever. It believes. In what—this is what the struggle is about" (*M*, 7). This as yet aimless will to believe is the vessel into which—coded in the novel at the encounter with a nameless charismatic orator (*M*, 101–3, 149)—Hitler can pour his ideological decisionism.³⁶

The force of the decision does not rest solely on the language act. The propagandistic orders would be ineffective, for the most part, were they not embedded in organized violence. The success of the beer hall speech is not just a matter of rhetorical skill but also of a security squad that lends emphasis by ejecting or beating up opponents (*MK*, 480–92). While—this was Hitler's insight—the application of violence alone, without a weltan-

³⁵ In *Michael* this sounds like this: "What am I actually studying? Everything and nothing. I am too lazy, and believe I am too stupid to study a specific subject. I want to be a man! To be something! Personality! The path to the new German!" (12); "Intellect is dangerous for the creation of character" (14).

³⁶ On decisionism and voluntarism as constitutive characteristics of the Nazi ideology, cf. the foundational study of Uwe Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung: Zum politischen Ort der Literatur im Zeitraum der klassischen Moderne* (Munich: Fink, 2009), esp. 393–405. On the general significance of decisionism in the thinking of the 1920s, see Christian Graf von Krockow, *Die Entscheidung: Eine Untersuchung über Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1990).

schauung behind it, is not effective in the long term (*MK*, 170),³⁷ the agitation's impact derives from the fact that its accompanying terror makes contradiction impossible. Violence and ideology, in other words, reinforce each other.

When it comes to this mutual reinforcement, Hitler's portrayal also permits different readings. The tenor of his book scarcely seems to vary from that of his public speeches. It is tempting to conclude that it is also addressed to the *Volk*. But *Mein Kampf* does not appeal directly to those who come to the tightly organized party gatherings, complete with accompanying brawls, in search of communal experience and a home in *weltanschauung*; as the object of propaganda, these people appear in *Mein Kampf* only in the third-person plural. Instead, staging strategies are discussed, together with often small-bore organizational instructions that are recognizably intended for internal use. Nor is this the actual source of the appeal of the corresponding chapters. Rather, their appeal derives from a blatant feeling of triumph over the extent to which others—Reds, the bourgeoisie—can be impressed by the ruthless use of violence. The “we” group generated by Hitler's writings includes all those who feel ennobled by mocking opponents who have been beaten bloody to suppress all possible opposition. The allure that *Mein Kampf* offers the cooler heads among its readers consists not in the availability of a specific conviction, wrung from the contest of opinions, but in the rabid refusal of all dialogue. It is then entirely immaterial whether a person, in his or her heart of hearts, agrees with Hitler's tirades or not. He or she can even, like some of the more intellectual figures among the Nazi elites, poke fun at Hitler's pseudoscientific race theory, smile behind raised hands at his strained speaking style, yet feel the reflective impulse to persecute mercilessly every expression of disrespect on the part of third parties. *Mein Kampf* extrudes a vortex of threat, a license to party members to answer opposition with a lust- and sadism-filled “Just you wait.” Its power of generalization plays out on an entirely different plane than ideological fealty in the more narrow sense. Within the spec-

³⁷ “Any attempt to combat a philosophy with methods of violence will fail in the end, unless the fight takes the form of attack for a new spiritual attitude. Only in the struggle between two philosophies can the weapon of brutal force, persistently and ruthlessly applied, lead to a decision for the side it supports” (*MK*, 172).

trum of signals that Hitler's book emits, it was likely this frequency, above all, that spoke to the inner circle of the NS movement.

For many outsiders, Hitler was a comical figure. He shares this characteristic with other dictators, who, despite the fear they create, also somehow appear ridiculous. The cabaret artist Serdar Somuncu, who performed readings of *Mein Kampf* in the 1990s, commented on this: "Hitler plus power is cruel, but Hitler minus power is a comedy."³⁸ One could thus conclude that the terror is a necessary way to prevent the secret ridiculousness of self-appointed political leaders from being perceived by their followers and victims, by using megalomania to compensate for the lack of legitimate authority. If we look at *Mein Kampf* based on the ingredients that make up the book's weltanschauung, then Hitler was just one among numerous autodidactic crazies who, in the crisis years around 1900, attempted to put their intellectual concoctions before the public. In general, it appears that radical political movements feed on an intellectual "precariat" of bohemians and academic dropouts, choosing compatible elements from their nervous overproduction of private mythologies.³⁹ But we would not do justice to the subject if we were to view the terror merely as a protective shield against involuntary ridicule, thereby reducing it to the function of intimidating bystanders who look on, laughing. Abysmally unreal comedic effects do not occur only when fright is averted. They also adhere, oddly enough, to terror itself, which, after all, is the most awful and real thing humans can inflict on other humans. The experience that the horrific, in its incomprehensibility, borders on comedy has been articulated again and again. The person who is incapable of locating his or her suffering within a meaningful context—however distantly imaginable that might be—finds himself or herself in a state in which even the most brutal reality seems wholly unreal. It is the characteristic feature of terror regimes that they enclose themselves in a self-reflexive purposefulness that is outwardly opaque and nonsensical and that brings them into an uncanny proximity to comedy, in which all meaning implodes.

³⁸ Quoted in Othmar Plöckinger, "Rhetorik, Propaganda und Masse in Hitlers *Mein Kampf*," in *Hitler der Redner*, ed. Josef Kopperschmidt (Munich: Fink, 2003), 139.

³⁹ Cf. my essay "Liminalität und Prekariat," in *Adolf Hitlers "Mein Kampf." Zur Poetik des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, Matthes & Seitz, 2016), 7–29.

Yet the sense of a link between comedy and naked violence is not exclusively passive. The link is also present in the triumphalism of the power wielders themselves and makes up an important part of the perpetrator's psychology. Arbitrary acts of self-sufficient omnipotence that refuse any explanation to the individuals who are acted on can, under certain circumstances, trigger an irresistible impulse to laugh. Ernst Jünger, in his description of a moment like this, provides an insight into the emotional state of fascist man. In his essay "Über den Schmerz" (1934), he writes:

In March 1932 I was present at the encounter of a three-man machine gun unit and a parade of demonstrators numbering perhaps five thousand, who, one minute after the command to fire, had disappeared from sight without so much as a single person being shot. The scene had something magical about it; it induced that profound feeling of hilarity that seizes you when a nefarious demon is unmasked. In any case, being present at the repulsion of this sort of unfounded claim to power is more instructive than the study of a whole sociological library.⁴⁰

The "claim to power" of the demonstrators, when confronted by a commando of the Reichswehr, is "unfounded" in that they can present their demands only in the form of an appeal. But the paramilitary unit's threat of violence is "unfounded" too, as are the well-rehearsed riot-producing attacks of the security guards in the beer hall, or the bullying of the storm troopers in whose "ruthless energy" and "brutal activism" Hitler later took such pleasure (*MK*, 483). Jünger's hilarity has nothing to do with a feeling of glee at the greater legitimacy of his own actions, but rather with gratification that here all attempts at understanding have been abruptly terminated. Faced with the muzzle of a gun, it is not possible to go on arguing for a more meaningful answer without succumbing to the sort of manifest

⁴⁰ Ernst Jünger, "Über den Schmerz," in *Sämtliche Werke: Zweite Abteilung*, vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), 168. For a more detailed analysis of this episode, see Albrecht Koschorke, "Der Traumatiker als Faschist: Ernst Jüngers Essay 'Über den Schmerz,'" in *Modernität und Trauma: Beiträge zum Zeitenbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Vienna: WUV, 2000), 220–21. In the following I have borrowed several formulations from this essay.

ridiculousness that attaches to all impotent protests, provided the onlooker is sufficiently disengaged. People with weapons do not need to waste words or empathize with their opponents. They must negotiate with no one, convince no one. It is not just the contrast between those people's own executive power and the impotence of their adversaries that incites laughter, but their free ascendancy over the other's claim to any kind of communicatively mediated meaning. The provision of meaning and ideological justification marks only the outer area of the totalitarian movement's impact. Its center is formed by elites who, in the words of Arendt, need no proofs and

are not even supposed to believe in the literal truth of ideological clichés. These are fabricated to answer a quest for truth among the masses which in its insistence on explanation and demonstration still has much in common with the normal world. The elite is not composed of ideologists; its members' whole education is aimed at abolishing their capacity for distinguishing between truth and falsehood, between reality and fiction. Their superiority consists in their capacity immediately to dissolve every statement of fact into a declaration of purpose. (*OT*, 384–85)⁴¹

The reflections presented here are not intended to deny that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is an ideologically extreme polemic. The chapter "Nation [*Volk*] and Race" not only contains the entire arsenal of anti-Jewish agitation but suggests the program of their elimination. Since Hitler's argument links his Jew hatred tightly to his militant opposition to Marxism and embeds these two core areas of his program in a panorama of world-historical dimensions, the impression of a coherent body of thought is created, which Hitler presents in full-throated tones of profound conviction. But this is not the book's only message, and for the more coolheaded among its readers, perhaps it was not even the most important. Alongside all the propagandistic claims there runs a second set of signals that could also have

⁴¹ The quotation continues: "In distinction to the mass membership which, for instance, needs some demonstration of the inferiority of the Jewish race before it can safely be asked to kill Jews, the elite formations understand that the statement, all Jews are inferior, means, all Jews should be killed" (*OT*, 385).

appealed to the “innermost stratum of the totalitarian hierarchy” that, in Arendt’s words, is characterized by “freedom from the content of its own ideologies” (OT, 387). The young attorneys, social engineers, and regional planners who rose to control the levers of power will not have been among the enthusiastic readers of *Mein Kampf*, any more than they were in sympathy with the brawling anti-Semitism of vulgar Nazis. But within the framework of the program that Hitler had set out, they found wide latitude for their own radical vision—with the result that the NS system fostered their rapidly advancing careers. For this group, National Socialism was an instrument, not a religion.⁴²

Such a perspective is suggested in *Mein Kampf*, as the book offers its intended readers a broad assortment of emotional rewards. To a nation traumatized by war and defeat, it offers the promise of restored honor and new greatness; to individuals who feel lost, it gives permission to replace ambivalence with unequivocal meaning and to act it out with unconstrained hatred. All this adds up to the satisfied wish for the “coherence of a fictional world,” as mirrored in Hitler’s vision of a state order grounded in beliefs about biological race.⁴³ In its accompanying overtones, meanwhile, *Mein Kampf* communicates one additional reward, which finds pleasure in the empty action value of words that have their effect: the fascination of a force that has its sole ground in its ascent to power, creating itself out of the void. This adjacency to the void has been interpreted as nihilism and ascribed to philosophical influences. But in the end it is more

⁴² “The National Socialist ideology was not an avowal of faith for most of these young, career-minded experts. It merely offered them maximum freedom of action” (Aly Götz and Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung: Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung* [Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1991], 288).

⁴³ “What distinguishes the totalitarian leaders and dictators is ... the simple-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements of existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of another, entirely fictitious world.... Their art consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experience. With such generalizations, totalitarian propaganda establishes a world fit to compete with the real one, whose main handicap is that it is not logical, consistent, and organized. The consistency of the fiction and strictness of the organization make it possible for the generalization eventually to survive the explosion of more specific lies” (OT, 361–62).

attributable to a specific use of language than to a system of ideas: to a use of language that does not articulate and give form to present actuality but finds satisfaction in deciding on being and nonbeing, life and death, by the power of its pure linguistic execution.⁴⁴

Translated by Susan H. Gillespie

⁴⁴ Cf. Hebekus, *Ästhetische Ermächtigung*; and Uwe Hebekus, "Der Wille zur Form: Politischer Ästhetizismus bei Georg Simmel, Ernst H. Kantorowicz—und Alfred Rosenberg," in *Die Souveränität der Literatur: Zum Totalitären der klassischen Moderne, 1900–1933*, by Uwe Hebekus and Ingo Stöckmann (Munich: Fink, 2008), 45–75.

Kim Il-sung (1912–1994)

“Poem Dedicated to Comrade Kim Jong-il
on His 50th Birthday” (1992)

Jong-il Peak soars high above Mt. Paektu,
Where the limpid Sobaek meanders.
Can it be the Shining Star’s fiftieth birthday
already?
Admired by all for his power of pen and sword
Combined with his loyal and filial mind,
And unanimous praise and cheers shake heaven
and earth.¹

¹ Kim Il-sung, “Poem Dedicated to Comrade Kim Jong-il on His 50th Birthday,” <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/30914081/kim-il-sung-poem-dedicated-to-comrade-kim-korea-dprcom> (January 13, 2016). Translator unknown.

Dead Father's Living Body: Kim Il-sung's Seed Theory and North Korean Arts

SUK-YOUNG KIM

Kim Il-sung (1912–1994), the founding father of North Korea, lies motionlessly in his crystal coffin in Geumsusan Memorial Palace, a solemn mausoleum made of white marble centrally located in Pyongyang. The expressionless look on his embalmed face captures a sense of immovable eternity, enshrined in the living memory of his children—his biological son Kim Jong-il and countless adopted children, namely the people of North Korea. Since July 1994, not a day has passed without tearful mourners paying their tribute to the eternal living father of the country. Though dead, Kim Il-sung has not quite ceased to exist, since his posthumous birthdays—dubbed as the Sun Festival—are celebrated every year on 15 April as if he were breathing among the living. Thousands and thousands of students and citizens participate in the elaborate ceremonies, which involve mass games, parades, and a dance party at the city's central plaza to celebrate the national father's birthday. Not necrology, but eulogy for the immortal father is pronounced there, forging the impression that the eternal cycle of Kim Il-sung's life is fully interlaced with the recurrence of the sun, repeating the diurnal appearance and nocturnal disappearance along the orbit of nation's destiny and constantly providing the unceasing source of life for all living creatures on earth.

Oxymoronic rituals like the Sun Festival defy the meaning of death so effectively that they mock the inevitable course of biological extinction. The Sun Festival—grotesquely celebrating the birth of the dead—creates the vital signs out of the deceased, whose body on display captures the national imperative to live with his eternal presence for millennia to come. Indeed, the people of North Korea are constantly reminded of Kim Il-sung's presence by the loudly painted placard and posters strewn all over

the country that proclaim the unchallenged truth: “The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung is immortal.”

But what do we know about this demigod, who dwells in the uncanny liminal space between the living and the dead? What perplexing impetus would it take for any national leader to create the first hereditary communist state that has ever existed in the history of mankind? Only bits and fragments about Kim Il-sung’s life before he started a statesman’s career in 1945 are reported to us. Still less is known about the artistic talent of Kim who would later be lauded by his citizens as the man who authored numerous plays and theoretical work on literature that had a formative influence on establishing the revolutionary tradition.

Kim Il-sung was born in 1912 to Christian parents, but none of this religious background entered his official biography published in North Korea. So much of Kim Il-sung’s childhood according to the official claim presents a perfect picture of a young revolutionary, but rather than to portray a revolutionary in the making, the hagiographic accounts present child Kim Il-sung as the one predestined to save his country. Even his Christian parents transform into zealous nationalists fighting to liberate the homeland from the Japanese colonial yoke in the official North Korean accounts: Kim Il-sung’s father, Kim Hyeong-jik, appears as a martyr who becomes imprisoned by the Japanese police, leaving behind young Kim Il-sung and his mother, Gang Ban-seok, to survive hard times on their own. Now fatherless, the young Kim Il-sung is guided by his resolute mother, who instills the unflinching spirit of resistance and a mission for vendetta. Having spent the fatherless childhood and having awakened to the revolutionary cause of liberating his country from the yoke of Japanese colonial rule, at the age of fourteen he embarks on an epic journey to save his country, ultimately reaching Manchuria, where he would fight against the Japanese Imperial army.

According to Charles Armstrong: “Kim Il-sung’s comrades from the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle in Manchuria was comprised of the least educated of the communist ‘factions’ and the least involved in cultural affairs.”² Indeed, there seems to be a total lack of any record that Kim Il-sung during

² Charles Armstrong, *North Korean Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 171.

this time was involved in any type of artistic activities which paralleled his guerilla struggle. Then something must have happened, something akin to what we might call a leap of talent, to transform Kim Il-sung from an undereducated guerrilla fighter to the paeon of literary brilliance who shapes the course of national arts and literature. How are we to address this perceivable gap? Regarding this issue, I have noted elsewhere that in

the 1940s, prior to the establishment of North Korea, North Koreans could transform Kim, the guerrilla leader in Manchuria, into a proverbial creator of revolutionary art and argue for the traditional authority of ... North Korean culture, which actually was an invented tradition formed over a short period of time under the strong influence of the cultures of the Soviet Union and the PRC. For these reasons, North Korea's literary history attributes the authorship of revolutionary operas and plays to Kim Il-sung: according to the official explanation, Kim either wrote the production scripts himself or provided his anti-Japanese resistance experiences as vibrant sources of plots for revolutionary operas and plays.³

To be sure, we cannot go beyond the fact that what we know about this literary and political god comes from the same rhetorical machinery that proclaims his eternity beyond death. For this reason, it would be futile to wrestle with the veracity of claims that North Korean official documents make. Rather, the real intriguing aspect of engaging with these texts is to unearth certain rhetorical patterns of how the past is recovered in the present. Whether we call it propaganda or not, the North Korean official discourse and theatrical performance seem to have been made for each other. Historical facts become perceptible only through the performed knowledge and nothing else in the case of North Korea, where the archives and museums themselves are the end products of heavily politicized discourses staged and performed as theatrical productions. Biography, national history, and dramatic works on stage create a seamless continuum to generate

³ See Yeon-ho and I Gang-ryeol, *Performing Art of North Korea* [Bukhan-ui Yesul] (Seoul: Goryeowon, 1989), 41. Quoted in Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 141.

an iterative and perfectly coordinated knowledge in North Korea. In a country where invented visions of the past overshadow an effort to unearth historical facts, historiography emulates the dramatic principle⁴ and dramatic performances dictate how history should be staged in the eyes of national subjects.

What stood at the crossroads of creating a fluid continuum between history, biography, and performance was Kim Il-sung's theory on national arts and culture, known as *jongjaron* (seed theory). Arguably, the most representative theory of Kim Il-sung known to the outside world is Juche, or self-reliance ideology, which advocates North Korea's independence in all spheres of life as a way of pronouncing the nationalistic framework of North Korean modernity. But more significantly for the purpose of investigating the cross sections of arts and politics, I contend that it is imperative to explore Kim Il-sung's seed theory.

Seed theory first appeared in 1972 in North Korea's *Dictionary of Literature and Art*, which correlated the concrete imagery of seed with Kim Il-sung's personal ideology:

In the process of materializing Comrade Kim Il-sung's juche ideology concerning literature and art, seed theory was born as the result of independent research by the party. Simply put, the seed constitutes the core of art and determines its essential value. Only when the creator of an art-work properly determines the core is he or she able to convey appropriately the ideological and aesthetic intentions and secure the philosophical ground of the work.... Seed theory is not merely limited to some aspects of creation, such as theme, ideology, or material. It determines the entire process of creation, beginning from the selection of material to the structure of the artwork, character development, and the fundamental value of the work.... The most important criterion in selecting the right seed is to examine how truthfully

⁴ I would like to acknowledge that this idea of looking at history through a dramatic model was suggested by Swiss literary scholar Daniel Cuonz during the working session on Socialist Imaginary in Global Theater and Performance during a meeting of the American Society for Theater Research, which took place on 14 November 2009 in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

it pertains to the ideas of Kim Il-sung's instructions and the party's political measures, which are the realization of Kim's ideas.⁵

Despite the close resemblance between the formulaic description of seed theory and the literary theory of socialist realism which first appeared in the Soviet Union in 1934 during the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, seed theory reflects unique practices to which there is no parallel outside the cultural boundaries of North Korea. Elsewhere, the personal instruction of the political leader was never regarded as the entirety of one nation's artistic principle, but in North Korea, the personal teaching of Kim Il-sung and the party policy were understood to be identical, defining the core of North Korean art.

What is even more striking is the unambiguous physiological association that the term "seed" conjures up in the minds of the North Korean people. Obviously "seed" here is used primarily as a metaphoric device to capture the core idea of Kim Il-sung's political thought, but it could also hint at the biological seed that the body of the national father produces in order to propagate posterity carrying the politically correct DNA. Given the prevalent political indoctrination of North Korea that all citizens are the children of Kim Il-sung, it would not be too far-fetched a reading to suggest so. By identifying the biological father with literary father through the procreative symbolic power of the seed, this theory could generate a simulacrum of logical continuity between Kim Il-sung as the father of the nation and Kim Il-sung as the sire of artistic tradition.

Another aspect which deserves further analysis regarding seed theory is its pronounced obsession with the past, or, to be more precise, with the significance of the origin. Seed is germinated with the ideas of the nation's origin and identity. If we were to extend this idea further, seed theory is a literary quest for locating the founding myth of the nation. This is why in North Korean literature, the 1930s became the epicenter of the mythmaking practice—the period when the seed for a future revolutionary society had been sown. In North Korean arts, the 1930s under Japanese colonial rule is illustrated primarily through the devastated lives of the people

⁵ Korean Association of Literary Criticism (KALC), *Forty Years of North Korean Opera and Theatre* (Seoul: Sinwon, 1990), 20–22.

whose family members were displaced and whose national dignity was violated by the occupation. The core of the problem for this narratology, which sustains the core narratives for national history, for Kim Il-sung's biography, and for dramatic literature and performance, lies in the significant absence of the father figure whose presence is a prerequisite for sustaining dignified family life, which stands as the unambiguous metonymy for sustaining North Korean nationhood itself.

Of numerous performance works allegedly authored by Kim Il-sung, no other work than *Sea of Blood* illustrates such a point so vividly. Known to be the brainchild of the Great Leader himself, *Sea of Blood* occupies a special place in the national imagination of North Koreans. It became the vanguard piece among the so-called revolutionary operas, enjoying the critical claim and frequent performance both home front and abroad. Just like the melodramatic messianic structure of Kim Il-sung's biography, *Sea of Blood* features a story of a family whose father is taken away by the Japanese colonial forces. The absent father's companion, simply addressed by the archetypal appellation "Mother" (an unmistakable reference to Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother* and Bertold Brecht's *Die Mutter*), fights against colonial oppression by the Japanese and transforms herself from a timid and ignorant homemaker to a fierce revolutionary fighter. At the end of the play, the family celebrates victory over Japanese colonial forces through their fearless resistance and waits for the advent of a socialist revolution. However, it is the earlier part of the play where the heart-wrenching scenes of melodrama play out, where the absence of the father is so palpably staged as a foundational crisis in the conversation among Gap-sun, the daughter, Won-nam, the son, and the mother.

Gap-sun: Why does Father not come home at night?

Won-nam: Mother, Yeong-gil's father was also taken by the Japanese bastards.

Mother grows extremely anxious.

Mother: Dear children, how shall we get by if we do not have Father?

Won-nam: Mother, Mother, we cannot live without Father, we cannot live.

Won-nam and Gap-sun: Stars are shining in the depth of the night. Is Father not returning home tonight?

Gap-sun: Birds seem to cry in grief on the back mountain tonight.

Gap-sun, Won-nam, and Chorus: We remain waiting for Father
without sleep.

The moon over the mountain shines so brightly.

Why has Father not returned home yet?⁶

Here, the absence of a father is inherently related to the imageries of nature, which appear to be both sensitive and indifferent to the tragedy to which the family is subject. Nature here remains a background as well as a participant in the face of a missing father: while birds emphatically project the grief of the family, stars and the moon over the mountain seem to exist the way they always have been.

If we were to understand father of this family as the metonymy of the national father Kim Il-sung, then it is possible to project the absence of the father in relation to the aforementioned seed theory. Seed theory, as it not only refers to the ideas of literary creation but also stands as the foundational forces of nature, illuminates why certain natural elements in the scene mourn the absence of the father. However, more crucially, the absent father as the germinating force of life seems to have planted potential for life within the family members, namely his posterity, to continue the revolutionary works he was never able to complete. Little children without a father in this scene, in this respect, not only point to the foundational crisis emerging from Father's absence, but also foreshadow the fact that they will continue the revolutionary ideals their father has disseminated in the family. The ambiguous projection of nature as both mourners of father's absence and indicators of life as usual merges with this transition within the family that now the revolutionary task, planted by the father, has been transferred to the younger generation. The children's legitimacy as revolutionary fighters, however, can only be validated through their origin (the blossoming seed of the father), and hence, simulating the mourning ritual of the Sun Festival where the living North Koreans as children commemorate the dead father Kim Il-sung as if he were alive. In this scene Won-nam and Gap-sun ever more painfully invoke the missing father as their originator.

⁶ Gang Yeong-hi, ed., *20 segiui hyeogmyeong gageuk* (Pyongyang: Gyoyuk doseo chulpansa, 1974), 44–45.

Won-nam in particular deserves our attention, as he can be read simultaneously as embodying a fictional theatrical character and the younger version of Kim Il-sung. According to the North Korean biography of Kim Il-sung, Kim's father was an anti-Japanese fighter who was imprisoned for his revolutionary activities. He became separated from his family, leaving behind young Kim Il-sung to follow his lead. Numerous stories have been circulated regarding Kim Il-sung's earlier days when he visited his father in a Japanese-run prison, pledging his resolution to emulate his father:

At the age of seven he [Kim Il-sung] and his mother visited his imprisoned father, whose countenance "had sadly fallen from the torture he had endured." After the visit, his mother told him that he would never see his father again. "I want you to grow up fast and avenge your father!" she cried, whereupon Kim, hearing these words, "swore before his mother that he would avenge his father without fail."⁷

Sea of Blood, as it is known as an autobiographic account of Kim Il-sung himself, features strikingly similar narratives when compared to Kim's official biography. Although Won-nam and Mother do not visit the father in the prison, Won-man eventually leaves home to join the anti-Japanese resistance movement, following in his father's steps.

Mother: Gap-sun, the night is deep, but why has your brother not returned home?

Gap-sun hesitates.

Mother: What are you waiting for?

Gap-sun: You shed tears of blood raising him in sorrow.

But he defeated the Japanese and went to the mountains.

We must send the beloved brother to the resistance force.

Once he embarks on a holy path

We will guard you by your side, Mother.

Mother: Let us make a military uniform for your brother who is on his way to recovering our lost nation.⁸

⁷ Quoted in Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 115.

⁸ Gang, *20 segiui hyeogmyeong gageuk*, 61.

In Act II, Scene 2, of *Sea of Blood*, we see the motif of a missing family man being reiterated, but this time, it is Won-nam who is absent rather than the father. The character Won-nam, seen in this light, is the summation of both a child and an adult, a son and a father, which allows the absent father's various stages of life to evolve in a chronological sequence. Just like the Kim Il-sung is dead but not quite dead, the ideal of the father, first depicted through the figure of Won-nam's father and then through Won-nam himself later, is present through his absence.

Kim Il-sung, as seen metaphorically through the figure of Won-nam and his father, is both the son and the father—the summation of patrilineal bonding. In this respect, Mother becomes simultaneously a mother and wife in relation to the ambivalent figure of Won-nam. This bizarre kinship created by literal and political incest is not a taboo for North Korea's collective consciousness, but rather a polygenetic framework for the seed theory to be materialized. Seed keeps propagating the family in this confusing yet fertile terrain of kinship woven by ideological and biological lineages. Dissemination of Kim Il-sung's seed conjures up the solar imagery of the state father's biological virulence, always enabling lives on earth generation after generation as the ultimate sire.

This unique kinship, which allows for the confluence of a father and a son, survives the test of time; and it is this unique kinship that allows North Korea to defend its political hereditary system passed down from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il. Rather than presenting itself as repressive legacy, this father-son imaginary, at least from the official North Korean perspective, is designed to provoke a liberating ethos, as the North Korean nation, tied by blood, or more precisely, by a father's seed, emerges as free and independent of immanent dangers of racial compromise by the Japanese colonial and American imperial forces.

Slavoj Žižek argues, "*if the real father is to exert paternal symbolic authority, he must in a way die alive*—it is his identification with the 'dead letter' of the symbolic mandate that bestows authority on his person."⁹ Going back to where this essay began, is this not precisely why Kim Il-sung's funeral was staged—as if it was an event to bury the dead so that his son

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2005), 259.

Kim Jong-il would rule as the new father of the nation with the ultimate authority of the netherworld eternally represented through the embalmed body of the dead Kim Il-sung? Is this not why Won-nam's father in *Sea of Blood* had to be absent so that the son could emerge as the father-son figure? It seems that the disseminating potency embedded in the seed theory is not only what enables such a transfer of authority from father to son, but also what ultimately disables the father's physical ability to disseminate for the sake of enabling his symbolic and therefore more permanent ability to authorize his son's succession. This can only be done in death, and for that matter, it could be said that Kim Il-sung's body for his son is more valuable in death than in life. As Žižek sees it, "this would be how the father pays the price for his authority, precisely by this castration as the gap between his empirical existence and his symbolic place."¹⁰

The dead body of Kim Il-sung in Pyongyang may be seen as devoid of beating heart and fresh stream of blood, but it therefore rules from the realm of the eternal. The North Korean people's love of that dead body, in this sense, is not akin to necrophilia, but to the worship of a religious icon—the abstract two-dimensional surface which graciously interfaces between the mortal and the eternal. Kim Il-sung might be dead but not quite deceased, since the symbolic seeds his dead body produces still fertilize the ground for arts and enable literature and performance to blossom.

¹⁰ Ibid., 84.

Mao Zedong (1893–1979)

“Snow” (1936)

The scene is the north lands.
Thousands of li sealed in ice,
ten thousand li in blowing snow.
From the Long Wall
I gaze inside and beyond
and see only vast tundra.
Up and down the Yellow River
the gurgling water is frozen.
Mountains dance like silver snakes,
hills gallop like wax bright elephants
trying to climb over the sky.
On days of sunlight
the planet teases us in her white dress and rouge.

Rivers and mountains are beautiful
and made heroes bow and compete to catch the girl—
lovely earth.
Yet the emperors Shihuang and Wu Di
were barely able to write.
The first emperors of the Tang and Song dynasties
were crude.
Genghis Khan, man of his epoch
and favored by heaven,
knew only how to hunt the great eagle.
They are all gone.

Only today are we men of feeling.¹

¹ Mao Zedong, “Snow,” in *The Poems of Mao Zedong*, translations, introduction, and notes by Willis Barnstone (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 71–73.

Mao Zedong's Poetry: Form as Statement

KARL-HEINZ POHL

Since Stuart Schram and Joachim Schickel's studies of Mao Zedong's poetry, many share the view that Mao's poems are the best—indeed, the most vivid and lively—evidence of his ability to combine tradition and modernity, Chinese and Western tradition. In short, they demonstrate his ability to “Sinicize Marxism.” According to Schram,

His poems are particularly revealing with respect to the synthesis between Marxism-Leninism and the Chinese tradition to which Mao professes. He has indeed written about the “Sinification” of Marxism in various contexts, but none of these prose discussions is as convincing as the manner in which he juxtaposes the two disparate intellectual worlds in his poetry.²

Or, as Schickel puts it: “His own poems are the sword he uses to cut through the Gordian entanglement between tradition and revolution.”³ On the one hand, because their modern revolutionary content is situated in traditional, classical Chinese form, Mao's poems are in fact an eloquent example of his ability to merge allegedly incompatible elements into a single unity—Mao's own form of dialectic. On the other hand, they also illustrate the subtle ways in which Chinese tradition remained alive for intellectual elites in the twentieth century, underneath the surface of modernity.

² Stuart R. Schram, “Mao as a Poet,” *Problems of Communism* 13 (Sept.–Oct. 1964), 43.

³ Joachim Schickel, *Mao Tse-tung: 39 Gedichte*, translated with a political-literary essay by Joachim Schickel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 60.

In the following, this “Gordian entanglement” will be examined in greater detail, i.e., the contradictions will be indicated which arise when one examines their literary and political context—the literary-historical developments of the 1930s up to the 1960s—and when one interprets Mao’s poetry and his statements about it.⁴

In the process, contradictions will be revealed in two specific areas: (1) between the official demands and provisions of literary politics (from the pro-Mao camp or Mao himself) as well as Mao’s poetic practice; and (2) between Mao’s poetic style and the poetic models and ideals he proclaims.

1. MAO’S LYRICAL OEUVRE

A conclusive assessment of Mao’s lyrical work is not yet possible since new poems continue to be discovered.⁵ In addition, it has been pointed out recently that much of the work published under his name may not have been authored by him but by “ghostwriters,” thereby casting doubt on the authenticity of his poems.⁶ Officially, forty-two poems have been pu-

⁴ For a different approach to contradictions between Mao Zedong’s poetic theory and practice, see Angela Jung Palandri, “The Political Significance of Mao Tse-tung’s Poetry: Certain Contradictions between Theory and Practice,” *Asian Studies at Hawaii, No. 4: East Asian Occasional Papers 2* (1970): 29–45.

⁵ In the January 1994 issue of *Shikan* (4), four previously unpublished poems by Mao appeared, precisely on the occasion of his one-hundredth birthday. One of them (dated 1955) has the form of five-character regulated verse form, which was not otherwise used by him; the three others (two from 1955 and one from 1957) are seven-character quatrains.

⁶ The allegation made here, that Mao had had his poems corrected or edited by others, does not seem so grave to me. It was common practice then as it is now. As noted in his letter to Chen Yi (see below), Mao himself reworked poems written by comrades. Moreover, it is considered perfectly acceptable to go beyond allusions and to incorporate entire lines by earlier poets into one’s own poems. Putting together complete poems from individual lines of other poets represents a unique form and art: the *jiju* (collected lines). Regarding the allegations, see *Zhengming* 12 (1993), 12; *China aktuell* 12 (1993), 1152.

At the start of the Cultural Revolution, there was a curious event surrounding Mao Zedong’s poetry that was later hyped in the Western media: the leader was accused—probably unjustly—of plagiarism. In the summer of 1966, a collection circulated of a total of twenty-five poems in *shi* and *ci* form under the title *Wei fabiao de Mao zhuxi shi*

blished, i.e., by Mao himself or his testamentary “executors”; in reality, however, he wrote far more. In total, about seventy poems are now known; more than a few of them were not published because the political winds had shifted or the addressees had fallen out of favor (examples include a poem written for Peng Dehuai in 1935,⁷ or poems for Jiang Qing and Lin Biao⁸ from the period of the Cultural Revolution).

The publication of Mao's poems took place, if we (over)simplify matters, in three phases: eighteen appeared in January 1957 (in the first edition of the poetry magazine *Shikan*, at the time of the pseudo-liberal “Hundred Flowers Campaign”⁹), thirty-seven in 1963, and two more in January 1976 (in *Shikan*, which was revived with this issue after having been shut down during the Cultural Revolution). After Mao's death, three poems were published by Chinese officialdom (one of them,¹⁰ dated 1923, is the earliest of those allegedly edited by Mao himself and intended for publication¹¹).

ci (Unpublished poems of Chairman Mao). These mostly impetuous and powerful verses were quickly copied by hand and distributed among the Red Guards. That fueled the Mao fever even more and led paradoxically to a short-term enthusiasm for poetry in the old style during the Cultural Revolution, which after all had begun with a frontal attack on all “feudal relics”—including classic poetry. As it later turned out, only six of those twenty-five poems had been written by Mao himself; the rest were authored by a young scientist named Chen Mingyuan who had close contact with Guo Moruo. To Chen's own surprise—and certainly without his intention—the poems had been released as Mao's works, evidently through Guo Moruo. Chen publicized this mistake himself but was severely punished for the “offense.” Mao himself, revered like a god in this phase of the Cultural Revolution, was most likely too detached from the events of the day to set the record straight. Chen was not rehabilitated until 1978; in 1988, he published a book of poetry entitled *Jie hou shi cun* (Poems that survived the catastrophe), in which his poems from the time of the controversy were also included. See “Plagiat,” *Der Spiegel*, 40 (7 April 1986), 186–89; Yang Jian, *Wenhua da geming zhong de dixia wenxue* [Underground literature from the period of the Cultural Revolution] (Ji'nan, 1993), 201–5; Yu Zhi, “Chuanhao Shigao zhongzhong” [Various poetry manuscripts copied by hand], *Dushu* 11 (1993), 47–48.

⁷ *Mao Zedong shi ci xuan* [Selected poems in *shi* and *ci* form by Mao Zedong] (Peking, 1986), 145; hereafter abbreviated as *MZDSCX*.

⁸ *Zhengming*, 12.

⁹ On this, see Douwe Wessel Fokkema, *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence, 1956–1960* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 105.

¹⁰ A *ci* according to the melody *He xin lang*, translated and elucidated by Joachim Schickel in *Neue Rundschau* 93 (1982), 53–54.

¹¹ *MZDSCX*, 1.

These forty-two poems appeared in 1986—ten years after his death—along with eight “unofficial” ones (including one dated 1918) in the collection *Mao Zedong shi ci xuan* (Selected poems in the *shi* and *ci* form of Mao Zedong) issued by the publisher Renmin Wenxue. It also contains three short letters about poetry, the last of which, addressed to Chen Yi in 1965 (and published in January 1978 in *Shikan*), provides the most information about Mao’s views on poetry.¹² In what follows, I will limit myself in my discussion of Mao’s poetry to the forty-two “official” poems.

Mao’s poetry can be divided into two creative periods, each comprising twenty-one poems: (1) 1923–36—poems he wrote between the ages of 20 and 43; and (2) 1949–65—poems he created between the ages of 56 and 72. The first poem of the first group is a love poem to his wife, Yang Kaihui, who was later executed by the Guomindang; the last one is the now famous poem “Xue” (“Snow,” written to the tune of “Qin yuan chun”). The first one in the second group originated in April 1949 in connection with the capture of Nanjing, as victory in the Chinese Civil War was likely; the last one, “Niaoer wenda” (“Two birds—A dialogue,” to the tune of “Nian nu jiao”) has a date of fall 1965; hence, it originated just before the Cultural Revolution. There are no poems from 1937 to 1948 or from 1966 until Mao’s death in 1976 (not even among the “unofficial” ones). Considering the distribution of the two forms, *ci* and *shi*, in both creative periods, the following picture emerges: of the twenty-one poems written until 1936, all but one (“Chang zheng” [The Long March], composed in 1935) are *ci* songs; of the twelve written after 1949, twelve are *shi* and nine are *ci*.

Given this remarkable shift in his preferred form—from *ci* to *shi*, or more precisely, to *lüshi* (seven-character regulated verse)—one is compelled to ask how significant this development is. Or, put differently:

¹² This is a short letter, but one which has managed to release a flood of exegetical articles, in particular regarding the term “pictorial thinking” (*xingxiang siwei*) and the autochthonous Chinese terms for metaphorical expression, *bi* (comparison) and *xing* (allusion). The tenor of Mao exegetes on this subject corresponds to a pattern that was applied in nineteenth-century encounters with Western thinking. Mao is said to have demonstrated that Western knowledge (“pictorial thinking” is a concept formulated by Russian theorists and imported to China) had already been anticipated as early as 2,000 years ago in China. See Wu Benxing, “Mao Zedong Shilun Pingxi” [An analysis of Mao Zedong’s poetological discussions], *Shehui Kexue Zhanxian* 5 (1993), 8.

What significance can be ascribed to the two lyrical forms that Mao used exclusively? Which styles and which models is he deploying in line with them? Does this shift in form correlate to other developments in Mao's life, or it is instead to more of a coincidence?

2. THE UNITY OF WEN AND WU

It goes without saying that Mao—unlike his contemporaries Wen Yiduo (1899–1944), Xu Zhimo (1896–1931), or Guo Moruo (1892–1978)—cannot be understood chiefly as a poet or writer; rather, he was primarily a politician, statesman, ideologue, and strategist. Yet, within these roles, he also participated in a tradition—one reaching far back to ancient China—of classical scholar-officials, all of whom wrote verses at least occasionally, and some even in multiple volumes. Since poetry in various forms was an important part of the state examinations since the Tang Dynasty, the classical scholar-official was well practiced in this art. He would exchange views with friends and like-minded people in poems that he dedicated to them. In addition, he created verses—using ink-brush calligraphy—when moved by feelings or thoughts in an inspired moment or stimulating company. These were esteemed by posterity less as literature and more as private evidence of admirable character in the case of important historical persons. James Cahill has thus observed:

In Sung and later times, the men most admired were not those who merely exemplified the simple virtues.... The Ideal Man, for the later periods in China, was a more complex figure, a richer personality; and the desire of later ages was to understand him, see him in all his richness and complexity. Treasured and transmitted were anecdotes reporting his behavior of sayings in various circumstances; his surviving literary productions; and, as revelations of even subtler facets of his mind than these could preserve, his calligraphy and paintings.¹³

¹³ James Cahill, "Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), 130–31.

Mao's poems and calligraphy have mainly been seen and savored up to now from this specifically Chinese perspective: as private testimonies of a complex, historically consequential figure. For Mao, as for the classic men of letters, writing poetry was a form of social intercourse. Many of his poems were written to share with, or to be dedicated to, both culturally ambitious comrades and other public figures. Hence, Mao's poems indicate that he stood entirely within the tradition of Chinese scholar-officials for whom the ability to express oneself in poetry meant something obvious. By virtue of his literary *and* military-strategic skills, Mao represents—even in modern times—an incarnation of the classic Chinese ideal of a man (and also a ruler¹⁴), based on a unity of civil and cultural (*wen*) abilities along with martial (*wu*) ones. That he was quite well aware of this ideal is demonstrated by his *ci* song titled "Xue" (Snow). It was composed in 1936, a few months after the end of the Long March, itself a heroic accomplishment that became a legend. In "Snow," he refers to five emperors of Chinese history, all of whom possessed military prowess but lacked cultural (*wencai*) skills or "poetic" (*fengsao*) ones. Men of true greatness, i.e., those who combine both sets and can simultaneously rise above convention—the *fengliu renwu* (rendered by Schickel as "open-minded individuals"¹⁵)—are still to be sought today. We may assume that Mao was not excluding himself from their ranks.¹⁶

¹⁴ See, for example, Kangxi (reigned from 1662 to 1722), who has been described as "a deliberate blending of *wen* and *wu*, of the accomplished scholar and courageous strategist." See Lawrence Kessler, "Chinese Scholars and the Manchu State," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 31 (1971), 200.

¹⁵ Schickel, *Mao Tse-tung*, 28; on the term *fengliu*, see also Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1948), 321ff.

¹⁶ See also the controversy over the interpretation of the last two lines of this poem in Joachim Schickel, "Schneeblindheit—Die sehr feinen falschen Bemerkungen des F. Denninghaus," *Hefte für Ostasiatische Literatur* 3 (March 1985), 65–79. I cannot concur with Schickel's (quite strong) opinion here, that is, that the designation *fengliu renwu* could not refer to Mao himself. On the contrary, the context (more than the numerous dictionary entries cited by Schickel) thoroughly confirms it. In addition: the timing of the first "publication" of "Xue" substantiates this impression. Mao dedicated a handwritten copy precisely of this poem to Liu Yazi while he was in Chongqing from August to October 1945 conducting peace negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek (*MZDSCX*, 62). That is how the poem was made public; it appeared in November of the same year

3. ARE OLD FORMS "NATIONAL FORMS"?

Although Mao—as a *fengliu renwu*—may not have considered himself restricted by social conventions and prevailing trends, his poetry in the old forms nonetheless fits well into this image. During the 1920s and 1930s, the *zeitgeist* in Chinese literature was moving in a different direction. What exactly does it mean for Mao, in the modern era, to be writing verses in classical forms, immediately after a literary revolution had transpired? And how is his poetic practice to be understood within the literary contexts of his era?

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 (part of the cultural and literary revival of 1917–23) had completely done away with the classical written language and literary forms. After 1920 poems written in the old style were frowned upon. They were considered outmoded, too constrained by detailed rules, and ultimately too elitist refined (*ya*) instead of—as was now desired—vernacular (*su*) and free of rules. The discrediting of the old forms led to a flurry of newfangled lyric creations, partly in free verse or prosaic language and partly as direct assimilations of Western meters and forms.

In narrative literature as well, this development had a similar effect. The language, style, and structure of the stories and novels increasingly emulated Western models so that communist-inclined writers (such as Qu Qiubai, 1899–1935) concluded that a “new written language” had emerged. They critiqued it as equally incomprehensible and elitist, and as equally distanced from vernacular language as classical written language had been.

by several newspapers in Chongqing and gave Mao the aura of a military commander *cum* poet.

Mao's own remark (in 1958!) on *fengliu renwu* indicates that he was using it to refer to the proletariat (!); it is cited in Nancy T. Lin, *Reverberations: A New Translation of Complete Poems of Mao Tse-tung* (Hong Kong: Joint Publisher, 1980), 42; and it is referenced by Schickel. It serves, however, as merely another example of the “authorial fallacy,” the well-known fact that authors are not always the best interpreters of their own works of art. This was especially the case in China where “interpretation” in 1958 meant a politically prescribed reading (and in fact still means that today). Schickel's polemic in this article should be countered with his own recognition that is worth heeding in his *Mao Tse-tung—39 Gedichte*: “No Chinese who interprets poetry can claim to have ‘the right to unconditional accuracy.’ Poetry is incompatible with dogmatism” (78).

Thus, in the 1930s, it was leftist writers who, having joined forces in a “Left League,” dominated the literary scene and who began to examine mass literature (*dazhong wenxue*) and national forms (*minzu xingshi*). Their motivation here was primarily political: they aimed to make effective use of literature in the political struggle, i.e., to address the masses using simple literary forms and to mobilize those masses in the class struggle as well as the national revolutionary struggle against Japan.

The discussion surrounding national forms, which had essentially commenced back in the early 1930s, reached a new high point in Yan’an following the Long March (i.e., after 1936). Mao himself had rekindled the debates, albeit more from a general political and ideological perspective, particularly in his 1938 speech “On the Role of the CPC [Communist Party of China] in the National Struggle,” where he demanded a linkage of internationalist content with national form—his “Sinicization.”¹⁷

Mao’s speech spurred a plethora of reactions from communist theoreticians. Their tenor was that the national forms sought were essentially novels in a vernacular register, folk songs or ballads, village operas, illustrated narratives, and so forth; however, an explicit exception was made for poems in the old style. Below we will cite the voices of three authors as examples: He Qifang (1911–1977), Guo Moruo, and Ai Siqi (1910–1966).

He Qifang, who made his mark as a poet,¹⁸ wrote in 1939 in *Wenyi Zhanxian* that a poetically talented comrade told him one evening that he had read and been moved by some poems of Du Fu (712–770). Yet the colleague was at a loss as to how he might adapt its classical forms to this new literature. He Qifang answered him that the forms of today’s literature, compared with those of Du Fu’s era, were far more progressive: “We now write free poetry. This is not only a Chinese form but currently the highest form of poetry throughout the world.”¹⁹ Although the free poem was not

¹⁷ *Wenxue yundong shiliao xuan* [Collection of materials on the history of the [modern Chinese] Literary Movement], vol. 4 (Shanghai, 1979), 382–84.

¹⁸ On He Qifang’s poems, see Bonnie McDougall, trans., *Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch’i-fang* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976). See also *Nachrichten von der Hauptstadt der Sonne—Moderne chinesische Lyrik 1919–1984*, ed. Wolfgang Kubin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 137–45, which includes six poems by Mao Zedong (165ff.).

¹⁹ *Wenxue yundong*, 408.

yet fully developed in China, it would certainly, with just a little practice, be able to express the complex moods and thoughts of modern humanity far more accurately than poems in the old style inasmuch as it made use of colloquial language. Toward achieving the ultimate goal of popularizing literature, he offers a fascinating “mathematical” formula: “new literature + vernacular forms = popularization.”²⁰ For He Qifang, in sum, poems in the old style are not only backward but also too narrowly Chinese whereas the free poem epitomized an advanced, “international” form.

Guo Moruo took part in the debate not from Yan'an but in Chongqing. He wrote in 1940 in *Dagongbao*:

The spirit of humanity is nowadays more liberated; we therefore believe that [today] these model-like rigidified forms from the feudal era are no longer possible. In poetry there should definitely be no more monotonous quatrains, regulated verses, or various *ci* songs.... If fixed lyric, epic, and dramatic forms no longer emerge in a capitalist society, then we should certainly a fortiori not expect them to appear in the society of the future.²¹

Guo—who became one of the pioneers of the modern poem—was said to have later refuted this thesis as Mao had also done: by virtue of his own output.²²

Lastly, it is more interesting and informative to read what Ai Siqi, one of Mao's chief ideologues²³ in Yan'an, elaborated—likewise in 1939 (in *Wenyi Zhanxian*)—concerning the question of national forms. For starters, he showed that the old forms had both advantages and weaknesses compared with the realistic mode of representation currently being called for. The advantage was that, within them (e.g., in the musical drama), reality was presented in a model-like manner, making special use of the stylistic device of hyperbole or exaggeration (*kuazhang*). The old forms were therefore not mimetic or realistic (*xieshi* or *xiezhen*) but like outlines or

²⁰ “Xin wenxue + minjian xingshi = dazhonghua,” *Wenxue yundong*, 410.

²¹ *Wenxue yundong*, 451.

²² See, for example, the poems of Guo in response to Mao, in *MZDSCX*, III, 120.

²³ On this issue, see Peter Kuhfus, “Ein Held, wer mit der Zeit geht,” in *Chinesische Intellektuelle im 20. Jahrhundert—Zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, ed. Karl-Heinz Pohl, Gudrun Wacker, and Liu Huiru (Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1993), 209–331.

sketches (*xieyi*). This might appear to be a weakness from the standpoint of this new understanding of literature, with its emphasis on realistic representation. In reality, however, it was a strength of the old forms, for it is the aim of literature to capture reality, not to reproduce it naturalistically in all its details. The old forms were thoroughly capable of doing so, owing to their exemplary and exaggerated mode of representation.

Nonetheless, from Ai's perspective, the old forms also had a weakness: their tendency to formalization (*geshibhua*), a feature of all the traditional elite arts of China. Accordingly, the more educated an individual, the more he or she was able to enjoy the refined language of forms of poetry composed according to sophisticated rules of prosody and rhetoric (rules of sound, parallelisms, etc.). This also applied to the stylized forms of gesture and song at the Beijing opera, or the art-historical allusions in painting. Such formalization, expressed each time in an elaborate set of rules, represented, according to Ai Siqi, a fetter—because it poses a considerable restriction upon the artist to capture reality. What is more, it led to the fact that the old forms remained inaccessible and incomprehensible to the broad mass of the people. The more pronounced the formalization, the more the old forms with their refined and stylized language would become merely an object of aesthetic enjoyment for an educated upper class. Consequently, Ai Siqi regards the tendency to formalization in the old forms of art as an expression of the conservative side of Chinese society.²⁴

The tenor of these voices is that writing poetry in the old forms was an outdated, conservative, and elitist activity. This opinion was even shared by Mao himself when writing nearly two decades later to Zang Kejia, the editor of *Shikan*, on the occasion of the publication of his first eighteen poems:

Officially speaking, I did not actually want to publish these things because are written in the old style, and I feared the spread of such errors could lead the youth astray.... Today one should mainly write poetry in the new style. It may be all right to occasionally write a poem in the old style, yet one should not encourage young people to do so, for these forms constrict thinking[!] and are also hard to learn.²⁵

²⁴ *Wenxue yundong*, 397.

²⁵ MZDSCX, 163–64; cf. Schickel, *Mao Tse-tung*, 45–46.

The discussion surrounding the national forms had taken place in Yan'an between 1938 and 1940 when Mao had penned the poems of his first creative period. Significantly, no poem by Mao from the Yan'an period has been published,²⁶ and this likely has its reasons. For the Yan'an period did not only span the (Second) Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Civil War (1945–49); it was also when Mao's authority was being consolidated through the Rectification Movement (Zhengfeng) which—with respect to literature—reached a peak with his 1942 “Speeches on Discussions of Literature and Art in Yan'an.”²⁷ For the new China, these speeches mark the end of artistic freedom and the beginning of literary dogmatism. From that point on, literature could only be the handmaiden of politics or “a cog in the machinery of the revolution.” The result was that all the writers ceased being creative and only “studied” old forms. It gives the distinct impression that Mao—taking the Zhengfeng campaign seriously himself—was practicing what he preached. And like the other men of letters in Yan'an, he stopped writing, especially since he had until then previously worked with highly unprogressive, unorthodox, and elitist poetic forms.

The first poem after his Yan'an phase is dated April 1949, when the victory in the Civil War had effectively been attained and Mao's role as the future political leader of China and “founder of a dynasty” was on the horizon. With that, his second creative period began, characterized by the “seven-character regulated verse”—the “most formalized” of classical forms—as the dominant type of poem.

²⁶ Robert Payne, though, relates that in Yan'an, Mao wrote poems during meetings “just like other people make doodles.” After the meetings, comrades would compete to pick up the verses that he had carelessly thrown on the floor. Robert Payne, *Mao Tse-tung: Ruler of Red China* (Hamburg: Krüger, 1951) 296, quoted in Schickel, *Mao Tse-tung*, 44.

²⁷ On this, see Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FORM

Here the previously raised question will now be addressed, of what is significant about the form of the two lyrical forms that Mao used exclusively: the *ci* song and regulated verse (*lüshi*). For the *ci* song, there are two important points to consider:

1. Among the classic lyric forms, the *ci* is a relatively “free” one. Although its prosodic rules (sound and rhyme schemes, etc.) are nearly as strict as those of regulated verse, there are hundreds of different *ci* melody patterns with different line lengths, sound patterns, rhyme schemes, etc. That is to say, the freedom allowed by the *ci* is a freedom to choose a particular melody form, by means of which the lyrical idea has more opportunities to find a suitable form of expression.²⁸ Mao applies a total of eighteen sundry song patterns (*cipai*) in his twenty-nine *ci* songs.

2. Originally, the *ci* song was a “dubious” form. Stemming from Central Asian melodies, it flourished in the Tang Dynasty within the milieu of “sing-song girls” in the (then) capital city of Chang’an. Until the Northern Song Dynasty, it served men of letters as a way to express “frivolous” thoughts, ones for which the more dignified form of the *shi* poem would have been inappropriate, i.e., for love or boudoir poetry. As of the Northern Song Dynasty, we find an extension of the theme of the *ci* by Su Shi (1037–1101) where it now serves as an expression of philosophical or heroic-patriotic thoughts. Su Shi thereby becomes the founder of a new style, the so-called “heroic-free” (*haofang*) style in which other song writers like Lu You (1125–1210) and Xin Qiji (1140–1207) went on to compose their verses.

The extent to which Mao is linked to this tradition of the “heroic-free” style follows from the fact that he maintains the melody scheme while adapting the content of a poem (“Yong mei” [Ode to the plum blossom]²⁹) composed by a poet famous for his patriotism, Lu You—the “old man, who does as he pleases,” the derivation of his pen name Fangweng.³⁰ In ad-

²⁸ However, the music of the melodies has been lost; all that remains are the rhythmic patterns of those melodies.

²⁹ MZDSCX, 113.

³⁰ Burton Watson, *The Old Man Who Does as He Pleases: Selections from the Poetry and Prose of Lu Yu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

dition, various borrowings in corresponding classical poems indicate the same, such as (for instance) the allusions in the highly "heroic-free" poem "Xue" (Snow) to Su Shi's *ci* "Chibi huaigu" (In memory of past times at the Red Wall), to be sung to the tune of "Nian nu jiao."³¹ Mao's *ci*, which (as he puts it himself) originated in part on horseback amid the struggle against Chiang Kai-shek's troops and/or on the Long March,³² are also part of this militant, free, and patriotic tradition.

It is quite different with the regulated verse form that achieved its high point in the Tang Dynasty: With so many specifications to be met, it is far stricter than the *ci*. The number of lines is set at eight, and that of the characters per line at five or seven. No character may appear twice. Grammatical auxiliary words (so-called "spaces") are to be avoided. Rhyme is mandatory at the end of every even line. Antithetical parallelism of the parts of a sentence is stipulated for the third and fourth, fifth, and sixth lines. Finally, each syllable must follow a sound scheme of alternating even and uneven sounds, which is what gives the poem euphony.

In contrast to the *ci*, the *shi* is the more dignified and earnest form of expression for a Chinese man of letters, with its tradition that reaches back to the classic *Shijing* (Book of songs). It is the form of the archaists (*fugu pai*) who have intermittently appeared since the Song Dynasty. Through meticulous observance of rules and imitation of orthodox models (mainly in the style of Tang Dynasty), they sought to compose demanding poetry. In addition, the aspect of regularity or fidelity to the rules (*fa*) is also closely related to Confucian orthodoxy, or to put it better, to "real existing" Confucianism. Since it was established as state doctrine in the Han Dynasty, it became increasingly known as outwardly Confucian yet inwardly legalistic (*wai ru nei fa*), in which case legalism stands for an ideology that restricts the individual and that is in many respects even totalitarian.³³

³¹ In *Tang Song ci jianshang cidian* (Handbook of *ci* Songs from the Tang and Song Dynasties), ed. Tang Guizhang (Nanjing 1986), 384; see Tilemann Grimm, "Zu Mao Tse-tung's 'Gedichten im alten Stil,'" *NOAG* 84 (1958), 24ff., as well as the additional examples there; cf. Schickel "Schneeblindheit," 70f.

³² Payne, quoted by Schickel, *Mao Tse-tung*, 44.

³³ In contrast, the Daoist tradition and the related Chan Buddhist (i.e., Japanese Zen) traditions do not only have an anarchic tendency but are also closer to a free, spontaneous creativity and naturalness in the realms of art and literature.

In his study of the archaism of the Ming Dynasty, Richard John Lynn writes about the import of the regulated verse form for the archaist Li Mengyang (1475–1529): “The successful poem is the intersection of the ideal poet as a person with the ideal linguistic means of expression, in which the poet realizes himself as an *ideal representative of his culture*, by presenting his character, sensitivities, feelings, and ideas in the approved form of poetry. And this approved form is the style of the Tang Dynasty in its heyday.”³⁴

Mao Zedong’s poetic practice is an example of how this characterization has not surrendered any of its validity even today. As of 1949, Mao was nothing less than an “ideal representative of his culture,” not only as “founder of a dynasty” but also as a modern embodiment of the traditional ideal of a union between *wen* and *wu*. So it should come as no surprise that Mao’s second creative period is dominated by the poetic form of *lüshi*. That period—in contrast to the earlier one shaped more by martial achievements—is distinguished mainly by civil challenges (the development of a country that is backward and has been devastated by war).

5. POETIC MODELS

In which style and according to which models did Mao write his *lüshi*? It is known that he admired the “three Li’s”—three Tang poets who all shared a name: Li Bai (701–762), Li He (791–817), and Li Shangyin (813?–858).³⁵ Li Bai and Li He were addressed by Mao in the aforementioned 1965 letter to Chen Yi. In it, he names their works as exemplars that are recommended. Nonetheless, he adds an important point: Li Bai wrote hardly any *lüshi*, and Li He only wrote a few *lüshi* in the five-character form and not a single seven-character *lüshi*.³⁶ By contrast, eleven of Mao’s thirteen *shi* poems are seven-character regulated verse and two are seven-character quatrains (*jueju* [partially regulated verse]). As for five-character

³⁴ Richard John Lynn, “Alternate Routes to Self-Realization in Ming Theories of Poetry,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian F. Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 325; emphasis added.

³⁵ See, for example, Wu, “Mao Zedong Shilun Pingxi,” 13.

³⁶ MZDSCX, 167.

regulated verse, Mao wrote in his letter to Chen Yi that he had never learned or published any poems in that form.³⁷

Let us briefly examine his three exemplars: Li Bai is one of the main representatives of the Tang Dynasty; Li He belongs to the mid-Tang Dynasty, and Li Shangyin to the late Tang. Li Bai is considered an unbound, “romantic” and Daoistically inspired genius whose poems are unrivalled. Li He is often designated as the poet of the “demonic.” He is regarded as unorthodox, difficult, even dangerous.³⁸ His poems are not included in the still popular anthology *Three Hundred Tang Poems* from the Qing Dynasty. Li Shangyin’s poems are ultimately among the most difficult classical poems ever created. They are rich in allusions, and often obliquely erotic and “obscure” (hence, theorists of modern Chinese “obscure poetry” [*menglong shi*] like to refer to Li Shangyin as the classical founder of the “obscure” tradition in China).³⁹ All three of the Li’s were not at all or only marginally successful in public life; they are equally considered to be “romantic,” unfettered by rules, and unorthodox, which now raises the question of whether Mao’s poetry reflects the influence of these admired models. Certainly one is hard put to compare Mao’s slim oeuvre of thirteen *shi* poems with the vast and varied lyrical production of Li Bai and Li Shangyin. If one is prepared to allow this comparison at all, then it can be said with some certainty that there is no formal affinity between Li Bai and Li He’s poems, for reasons that Mao himself had enumerated to Chen Yi (see above). In addition, one can hardly find in Mao’s *shi* poems the aforementioned stylistic and thematic characteristics for which the three Li’s are known.

Regarded from a formal standpoint, the regulated verse form in which Mao wrote suggests instead a connection to another great poet at the height of the Tang Dynasty—for the seven-character *lǚshi* is Du Fu’s form. He dominated it like no one else and succeeded in making it popular. Du Fu’s poems are deemed regular and capable of being “learned.” That is why his style and his seven-character form have remained foundational to the

³⁷ The poem recently published in *Shikan* shows that he attempted to do so; see fn. 283.

³⁸ William H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 536f.

³⁹ For example, there is Pan Xiutong, “Hanxu mei yu menglong” [Suggestively beautiful and obscure], *Wenyi Yanjiu* 4 (1983), 86ff.

present day.⁴⁰ The archaists of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, who debated extensively the rules of poetry and pedantically weighed each character, took him as their model. This influence can be illustrated in Mao Zedong's poetic practice. For example, while Du Fu writes in one verse that "At my age I am increasingly careful with prosodic rules" (*Wan jie jian yu shilü xi*),⁴¹ we find comparable statements in Mao's letter to Chen Yi, such as his insistence that it is really necessary to follow the rules in writing *lǚshi*.⁴² An analysis of Mao's poems according to the standard rules of prosody reveals that he largely complied with these provisions.

Thematically, his proximity to Du Fu can only be perceived indirectly, for key features of Du Fu's poetry—his human warmth and compassion—are absent from Mao Zedong's works. But there is also an affinity: both are "politically committed" poets. Du Fu's verses always exhibit the Confucian concern for country and the people (*you guo you min*). This corresponds to Mao's national revolutionary commitment and his communist ideology that found such fertile ground in China, not least because of its relationship to legalistic-Confucian thought.

In Mao's letters and poems, there are further signs of his closeness to the archaistic tradition that is faithful to the rules:

- Starting with the Southern Song Dynasty, the poetry of the Tang Dynasty in its heyday formed the orthodox model for almost all archaists to come. This is entirely in line with Mao's preference for poetry of the Tang Dynasty and his criticism of the poetry of the Song Dynasty that he supports with his seemingly modern demand for "figurative thinking" in poetry.⁴³
- The parallelisms required by the regulated verse form in the second and third couplets are, in the case of Mao's poems, often quite conventional and fixed. For example, these can be found in four of his

⁴⁰ Here see also Li Zehou, *Der Weg des Schönen—Wesen und Geschichte der chinesischen Kultur und Ästhetik*, ed. Karl-Heinz Pohl and Gudrun Wacker (Freiburg: Herder, 1992), 252ff.

⁴¹ *Quan Tang shi* [Complete poems of the Tang Dynasty] (Peking, 1960), *juan* 234, 2586.

⁴² *MZDSCX*, 166.

⁴³ Letter to Chen Yi, *MZDSCX*, 167f.

lüshi juxtapositions of heaven (*tian*) and earth (*di*).⁴⁴ Round numbers such as 100, 1,000, or 10,000 are likewise often paralleled (twice, in fact, in the first of the two poems, “Song wenshen” [Farewell, god of the plague]⁴⁵). In a 1959 letter to Hu Qiaomu about poetry, Mao highlights a parallelism from his poem “Deng Lushan” (Ascent to Lushan) as particularly successful.⁴⁶ It is likely better than the clichéd parallelisms just mentioned, yet this couplet with its geographical juxtaposition (the view upstream and downstream from the mountain) has a more conventional effect of solid craftsmanship: Mao understood well, just like the archaists, what the rules and *gongfu* of poetry were.

In Mao's *lüshi*, a thematic, stylistic or formal influence of the three Li's can hardly be discerned (except for one line adopted from Li He).⁴⁷ With their unorthodoxy and marked unconventionality, these predecessors seem to represent for Mao more of a collective alter ego, or perhaps a poetic attitude of unconventionality and nonorthodoxy that he evidently preferred as the supreme political authority of a totalitarian “orthodoxy.” Furthermore, Mao's admiration for the “three Li's” was consistent with the trend, ongoing since the May Fourth Movement, to criticize everything that might at all be associated with the Confucian tradition while at the same time valorizing unorthodox thinkers and writers—mostly by referring to them as “proto-materialistic.” As is well-known, this tendency reached its peak in the Cultural Revolution. At that time, Du Fu was also labeled with the disgrace of being “Confucian,” and Guo Moruo—knowing Mao's preferences well—wrote a monograph on Li Bai and Du Fu in which he lauded Li Bai as a “revolutionary” unconventional spirit while diminishing

⁴⁴ *MZDSCX*, 91, 92, 104, 116.

⁴⁵ *MZDSCX*, 91, 104, 109.

⁴⁶ *MZDSCX*, 165 and 99. Barnstone translates it as follows (95): “Clouds over the nine tributaries and the floating yellow crane, / where waves ripple toward the Three Wu. White mist flies up.”

⁴⁷ It is the second-to-last line in the poem “Capture of Nanjing by the People's Liberation Army,” in *MZDSCX*, 66 and 69; Barnstone translates *Tian ruo you qing tian yi lao* as “If heaven has feelings, it will grow old” (75). The poem by Li He is entitled “Jintong Xianren ci Han ge” [Farewell song in Han of the gold-bronze immortal], *Quan Tang shi*, *juan* 391, 4403.

Du Fu as a member of the aristocracy and class of landlords.⁴⁸ Whatever the case, Mao Zedong's poetic practice—his adherence to the rules of the seven-character form—suggest less the influence of the “three Li's” and more his closeness to the orthodox archaistic tradition of Chinese poetry that was aligned with Du Fu.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, the following can be affirmed: Mao's creation of poetry in old forms is a sign of his literary sophistication (*wen* and *ya*), which—coupled with the writer's martial skills—were part of the traditional ideal of personality. In the 1920s and 1930s, his poetic practice does not correspond to the literary trends of his time; to that extent, it can be identified as a sign of his unconventionality. However, judging by the opinion of his colleagues during the Yan'an period, such practice is more an expression of his conservatism and his Sinocentrism.⁴⁹

The two forms in which Mao wrote reflect two sides and two phases of his life: In his *ci* song, he draws upon the *haofang* tradition. It stands for his combative, unconventional, and patriotic (or national revolutionary) side—what communist critics in the 1960s (such as Guo Moruo) often apostrophized as a union of “revolutionary realism” and “revolutionary ro-

⁴⁸ Guo Moruo, *Li Bai yu Du Fu* [Li Bai and Du Fu] (Peking, 1971).

⁴⁹ This is also suggested by the circumstance that Mao did not think much of modern Chinese literature—and even less of its Western counterpart—with the exception of Lu Xun, whom he revered like a saint (and who, despite his role as a pioneer of modern Chinese literature, wrote almost exclusively in classical forms, indeed mostly in the seven-character *lǚshī*). As repeatedly attested, his reading in the area of literature consisted almost entirely of classic novels, poetry, works of history, etc. Lu Xun's ambivalent relationship to Chinese tradition has since been frequently emphasized so that in his case the stereotypical image of the iconoclastic innovator no longer does *him* justice, either. His poetry in classical forms is usually understood as the most private side of his multifaceted literary oeuvre. See, for example, Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), or Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

manticism.” Thus, while the *ci* is the dominant form of his younger years (until he was around 43), he nonetheless cultivated it even in old age.

This contrast takes on a new quality from 1942 and/or after 1949 if Mao’s *ci* poetry, composed between 1923 and 1936 in the relatively free period of the struggle, is understood as an expression of a conservative attitude that is nonetheless also unconventional and opposed to the literary *zeitgeist*. After the founding of the People’s Republic, the new colloquial poem was no longer consistent with a contemporary movement that sprung from a literary revolution. Instead, it is a form decreed from above; it is one specifically prescribed by a ruler who can consent to different standards for himself, indeed one who can even increasingly devote himself to the “most formalized” of classical Chinese poetic forms, the seven-character *lüshi*. Hence, the *lüshi* is not only the form of his later years but especially of the political leader—an “ideal representative of his culture”—and ruler. It is the “imperial” form, as it were. As for his mastery of the medium, Mao is here part of a long tradition of illustrious predecessors. However, his performance in the field of “imperial” poetry when compared to many predecessors can only be classified as modest, at least quantitatively speaking: the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing Dynasty (who reigned from 1736 to 1796) was proud, for instance, that he had published 454 volumes (*juan*) with *shi* poems. Nevertheless, in his case, not unlike Mao’s, people questioned whether he was truly the author of the more than 42,000 poems published under his name.⁵⁰

Mao’s adherence to the form of the seven-character *lüshi* and his fidelity to its rules ultimately suggest how close he was to archaist tradition, and thus to a legalistic-Confucian one as well. In his already quoted study on archaism in the Ming Dynasty, Richard John Lynn remarks with a casual composure that “archaism and authoritarian state ideology seem to have much in common.”⁵¹ Using Mao’s poetry as an example, one might also add: And they still do today.

Translated by David A. Brenner

⁵⁰ *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period*, ed. Arthur Hummel (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office 1943), 371.

⁵¹ Lynn, “Alternate Routes,” 337.

Muammar al-Gaddafi (1942–2011)

Excerpt from “Escape to Hell” (1993)

But how hardhearted people are when they collectively go too far! What a mighty river, with no compassion for anyone who gets in its way! Who does not hear another’s cries or stretch out a hand when he is begging or asking for help? Yes, they push him away without hesitation. The tyranny of an individual is the most shameful of all tyrannies, but the depot is an individual whom the community may eliminate; yes, even an insignificant individual may eliminate him. At the same time, the tyranny of the masses is the most brutal form of tyranny, for who on his own can withstand the torrent and its blind all-inclusive power?¹

¹ Muammar Gaddafi, “Escape to Hell,” in *Escape to Hell and Other Stories* (London: John Blake, 1999; originally published in Libya in 1993), 41.

A Poor Despot Descends to Hell: On the Writing and Thinking Styles of Muammar al-Gaddafi

HEINER LOHMANN

I. THE POET AS A POOR DESPOT

If we follow the lyrical alter ego who intones the above sentences penned for him by the real despot Muammar al-Gaddafi, then despots are a political species, defenseless, persecuted, and threatened in their existence. What is more, in the story “Escape to Hell” which begins with the passage just quoted, it is never once mentioned what is so “shameful” about the tyranny of an individual. Tyrants are not tyrants at all there: they are innocent, and they do not oppress others; *they* are the oppressed ones. For it is the merciless, dull masses who act with collective force to stop the despot who is making sacrifices for them:

They conspired against Hannibal and poisoned him, burnt Savonarola at the stake, brought their hero Danton to the guillotine. Robespierre was destroyed by his beloved fiancée, while the masses dragged Mussolini’s corpse through the streets, and spat in Nixon’s face as he departed the White House for good, having applauded his entrance years before. What terror! How horrible! Who can address the unfeeling self and make it feel?”²

The lyrical ego to whom al-Gaddafi is lending his voice introduces himself as a paternal autocrat, a “benefactor come from the desert; as a liberator of fetters and chains” (45). The masses love their tyrant, but they have no mercy on him, do not know “their duties.” In making demands on the

² Gaddafi, *Escape to Hell*, 42. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

benevolent despot, they are as insatiable as wild animals while he himself leads the ascetic life of nomad: "So, what can I—a poor Bedouin—hope for in a modern city of insanity? People snap at me whenever they see me: build us a better house!" (43). The despot has unwittingly become a pre-modern desert nomad; those who are actually ruled by him turn out to be modern, civilized city dwellers. "I am an illiterate Bedouin, who does not even know about painting houses or sewage systems. I drink rain water or well water using my hands, filtering out the tadpoles with my cloak" (44). Although he owns nothing, the urban masses press him with their demands for better infrastructure, for property and foodstuffs. The Bedouin, however, is without protection or possessions: "I am very sensitive, unlike city people" (46). He, the undespotic despot, the liberator of the masses, has done more "that an individual is capable of doing. Yet, the mad people of the city constantly ask me for these things. I felt that I was the only one who did not own anything, so, unlike them.... Since I had not requested anything, my situation became quite distinguished, or rather unnatural. Thus, I was and still am exposed to all of these requests and bother" (45).

The inconsistencies in the story presented here raise some questions: Why do wealthy urbanites harass a dispossessed Bedouin with their material demands? Why do they love him and at the same time wish to end his life? Why is the conflict between an autocratic ruler and his subjects subtly transformed into an antithesis of city and desert? Why is the despot actually not a despot, but a "redeemer" and benefactor, over whom the masses exercise strict authority ("Why won't you all give me a passport?")?

Some interpreters see in the story—regarded as the most interesting and important in the collection and eponymous with the title of the English translation—al-Gaddafi's paranoia, his mounting fear of a coup or assassination. This empiricist reader may explain the content but not its text-immanent form. In particular, it does not explain the gray zone of desymbolized metaphors or the misperceptions the narrative contains.

Rotter believes that the story's diction reveals that al-Gaddafi did not write down the stories but recorded them on tape. It is the impression the reader especially gets when encountering the story "Escape to Hell." The narrator appears to be on a rant; free associating, he lets himself be propelled by what occurs to him at the moment. Rather early on, he discloses the common theme adopted at the start of the story: the shamefulness of

autocracy and the opposition between ruler and ruled. The highly implausible jumps in the sequencing of the story are bridged by him with pseudo-metaphors that never quite make sense. Nor is the connection between despot and Bedouin in the figure of the protagonist ever explained. The only things the two have in common are being sentimental and being hounded. Likewise, it is not clear what the despot-murdering masses have in common with the civilization-oriented city slickers whom they are turning into.

Their liberation from the despot is also presented ambivalently: "I love the freedom of the masses, as they move freely, with no master above them. They have broken their chains, singing and rejoicing following their pain and tribulation. Yet how I fear them!" (42). What is being described here? The struggle for liberation? Yet the ruler is no longer there, and the shackles have already been loosened. Is it then the joy after the liberation? But the masses have just begun to break their chains in order to liberate themselves. What is more, the "torrent" in the previous sentence was being portrayed as "the harshest type of tyranny." This, too, points up an ambiguity between revolutionary violence and the dictatorial form of mass rule.

Al-Gaddafi takes this avoidance of distinctions to an extreme. It cannot really be determined from the text how the despot and the masses truly differ. The despot figures from the outset as an oppressor who, crying for help, reaches out to the people; yet the multitude are repressive perpetrators. And relationship between the parties is reciprocal: "I love the masses as I love my father, yet fear them in the same way. In a Bedouin society, with its lack of government, who can prevent a father from punishing one of his children? It is true that they love him, but they fear him at the same time. In the same way, I both love and fear my father" (42).

Nonetheless, the aforementioned patriarchal relationship of the "benefactor, who came from the desert" with his ungrateful subjects is no relationship. For the despot is the child of the masses, a son of the people who must expect to be punished by the masses. The reference to Bedouin society insinuates the father's right to punish his son. However, this right becomes questionable when it is remarked that one could not prevent a father from exercising it. For this formulation in turn suggests that the right is a dubious one. Moreover, the reference here is not to punishment but revenge. And although revenge is a measure of social control in Bedouin

tradition, it concerns only those who do not belong to the family and to the tribe; it does not encompass a father–son relationship. Here, then, the hermeneutic confusion of this text has reached the extremes of unintelligibility. The structures of the story have fallen apart; it is losing its internal sense, functioning in a fashion that is muddled and incoherent.

Arno Widmann, perceives this story as “nine pages of world literature. There is not a similar text by an autocrat in the last 3,000 years, probably not even remotely. Al-Gaddafi is the only one who gazes coldly at love from the masses.... The attraction and power of this text consists in how he regards it consistently from the side of the ruler, and not for one second—as would be politically correct—from the side of the ruled.”³ Widmann is not just exaggerating with respect to the entire collection (“There are twelve texts here, and almost each one is a revelation.... In the West we don’t have a single book of this kind”). Rather, he also reads into “Escape to Hell” what he expects to see, thereby misunderstanding the story. For it is not one characterized by love or cold observation but instead by an overbearing sentimentality; for it does not live by any conclusive distinction, either between ruler and ruled or between one lover and the other. Perhaps there really is not “a similar text by an autocrat in the last three thousand years” that so hermetically eludes understanding.

Widmann’s review is expressive of an illusory understanding that has long been typical of the reception of al-Gaddafi. Such a hermeneutic attitude is to be found both in *The Green Book* and interpretations of it, an attitude which sidelines the problem of understanding unfamiliar symbolic statements, instead of accepting them as a challenge to incorporate surprising and uncomfortable aspects of what is foreign. As I have elsewhere demonstrated, al-Gaddafi’s *Green Book* has become the victim of a Western intellectual sociocentrism.⁴ It has consistently been regarded as a political text although its most tangible aspect is its mythic character.

³ Arno Widmann, “Der Spaßmacher als Tyrann,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 30 November 2004, <https://www.perlentaucher.de/vom-nachtisch-geraeumt/schoenste-rollen-prosa.html#a2> (January 13, 2016).

⁴ Heiner Lohmann, *Strukturen mythischen Denkens im Grünen Buch Mu‘ammar al-Qaddafis. Eine kommunikationstheoretische Untersuchung zur Rationalität eines soziozentrischen Weltbildes im Islam mit einer Neuübersetzung des Grünen Buches im Anhang* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), 66ff.

Al-Gaddafi's narrative "Escape to Hell" offers the reader no clue as to what is at stake in it. In this respect, there are parallels to *The Green Book* here. For all of the synopses I have read about this story and al-Gaddafi's longer work are merely makeshift approximations owing to their short space; none of them do justice to the internal meaning of either work. The only interpretation one finds—that al-Gaddafi's *Green Book* introduces his ideas for a model of direct democratic participation—stems from a pseudo-understanding that barely strays from the external structures of the text. I have demonstrated in some detail that, owing to categorical misperceptions of his reifying linguistic worldview, al-Gaddafi does not strictly distinguish ideal validity from factuality, theory from reality, or even language from the world. In other words, he is unable to separate his model of direct democracy from the de facto world order. He lacks the criteria to understand his interpretations as subjective ones. To that extent, he is consistent in confusing his authorship of the direct democracy model with human history. "The people's congresses and people's committees are not a product of the imagination as much as they are also a result of human thinking that has absorbed all human experiences with democracy."⁵ "All of these [i.e., al-Gaddafi's discussions on the origin of the social] are facts that have existed since the beginning of human existence; they are not ideas based on one's own judgment."⁶ Here we see the contradictions that ensue when one confuses internal semantic contexts (e.g., the concept of direct democracy) with external factual ones (e.g., historical events). In keeping with the circular logic of these two quotations, al-Gaddafi's direct democracy is not something invented but the result of human thinking, which in turn cannot be strictly distinguished from the historical experiences of those who interpret it.

Here we are dealing with the *illusion of the eternal, unbound Bedouin*, which is deeply rooted in the nomadic culture of Libya. With greater or lesser insistence, al-Gaddafi has let this illusion guide many of his works,

⁵ MFÉ, *Min maktabat al-fikr al-ġamāhīrī* [Collection of speeches and conversations of Muammar al-Gaddafi], in *al-Markaz al-'Ālamī li-Dirāsāt wa-Abḥāth al-Kitāb al-Akhḍar* (Tripoli: International Center for the Study and Research of *The Green Book*, 1983), vol. 42, 179.

⁶ Muammar Gaddafi, *The Green Book* (Tripoli: Center for Study and Research of *The Green Book*, 1987), Part 3, "The Nation."

exploiting it to justify his de facto military dictatorship. The structural possibilities of constructing such an ideology and illusion can only be obtained at the price of a structural interdependence of language and the world as well as of an extensive dedifferentiation of concepts of the world. Therefore, no more distinctions are made between what is to be regarded as an objective fact, social norm, and subjective authenticity. Because these spheres of validity in *The Green Book* comprise a syndrome, al-Gaddafi is able to present direct democracy as he wishes, either as his own idea or a fact that has “always already” existed. Hence, it is not only inaccurate but also inappropriate to maintain that al-Gaddafi is proposing a model here. More appropriate is the interpretation that he is explicating a kinship system that has been hypostatized into a world order. Yet this too is the assessment of an external observer, a judgment that does not do justice to the systematic ambiguity of *The Green Book*.

With that in mind, we also have to assess the reading that one finds nearly everywhere, that “Escape to Hell” is about a despot fleeing from the masses. For the protagonists and plot lines of this narrative are utterly ambiguous. The lyrical ego eventually descends into hell, yet do not know who the narrator is (an ex-tyrant or a shepherd-nomad?), or why he is being harassed and persecuted (a will to freedom? greed?) and by whom (the popular masses or the city dwellers?).

2. THE DESCENT INTO HELL AS ESCAPING THE WORLD FOR A BETTER PLACE

Al-Gaddafi certainly knows how to depict the descent into hell motif using impressive language:

I escaped twice to hell, fleeing from you only in order to save myself. Your very breath bothers me, invading and violating my privacy; it seeks to squeeze me dry, greedily devouring my essence, licking up my sweat and sucking in my breath. Then it pauses, to give me a short breathing space before it attacks me again. Your breath chases me like a rabid dog, its saliva dripping in the street of your modern city of insanity. When I flee, it continues to chase me, through cobwebs and esparto. So I decided to escape to hell, if only to save myself. (48f.)

The point of the descent into hell—indeed the deeper meaning of the motif, of choosing an extremely inhospitable place as a refuge—is in the implied assessment that the fugitive’s burdensome living conditions are the worst conceivable—even worse than the site of damnation. The reader’s expectation is hence transformed into its opposite. For hell has become an oasis, a cool site of peace and tranquility. And yet hell is perfectly still and quiet. “It was a strange and wondrous silence that surrounded hell, a solemn silence. I saw no flames, but only rising smoke” (50). Hell is not hellish but instead a heavenly place before which the sun grows faint (51).

In this apocalyptic scenario, the fugitive finally comes to himself. “I began to melt within myself, as my self also began to melt within me. Each of us protected the other and we became one for the first time” (51). Here, then, a third transformation takes place. After the tyrant has mutated into a simple desert nomad, he embarks on an existential journey with a new identity. “Everything then disappeared around me, except for my own existence, which I felt more strongly than at any previous time” (51). And the motif of the persecutors, from whom even the animals are fleeing, has now taken on Mephistophelian features. They no longer want power or possessions; instead, they want his soul. At this point, the story has now reached its climax and its close, and its meaning seems to unveil itself. The modern world is robbing the traditional way of life of its soul.

For we—I mean me and myself—were like dangerous criminals in your city, subjected to searches and surveillance. Even after our innocence was proven, and our identity became known, we were placed in prison, guarded closely. Your purpose was always to prevent me and myself from coming together, so that you could sleep easily and contentedly. How beautiful hell is compared to your city! (51f.)

So, is the story “Escape to Hell” the metaphorical depiction of the alienation and uprooting of traditional societies by the intrusion of modernity? This interpretation seems to suggest itself. But then, why the figure of the paranoid despot? Is it perhaps more the portrait of an aging, benevolent autocrat whom his subordinates would like to kill? But then, why are greedy city folk bullying the dispossessed Bedouin? Why is his soul being

stolen? Or are we dealing with a fabulous pool of associations which people can take to mean whatever they want? Is it referential openness or arbitrariness?

3. "DEMOCRACIES ARE THE WORST TYRANNIES"

A nod to the closed character of al-Gaddafi's mindset is found in the following passage from the narrative quoted at the start of this essay:

The tyranny of an individual is the easiest kind of tyranny, since in the end, it is an individual that we are talking about. The group can get rid of him when it wishes; the individual may be removed by another individual, who himself may be worthless and unimportant. But the tyranny of the masses is the harshest type tyranny, for who can stand against a crushing current, against a blind overwhelming force? (41)

This is the sole passage in the story where al-Gaddafi is constructing an argument and not making things up. Here, again, when it comes to a simple context, the narrator loses himself in a narrative that lacks all distinctions. For the text's propositional content cannot at all be identified inasmuch as it dissolves into a contradiction. What exactly is it about? Here something is being demarcated from something else that is truly not so different. How to distinguish "[t]he tyranny of an individual is the most shameful of all tyrannies" from "[t]he tyranny of the masses is the most brutal form of tyranny"? The latter is substantiated by the notion that one is powerless against the masses. If that is the case, then the individual tyrant—because he is vulnerable—should be a benevolent ruler. Yet that he is not. His rule is also the "most shameful of all tyrannies." Al-Gaddafi here is not making action a criterion of legitimate sovereignty but something else that is not an ethical category: the *stability* of rule. Nonetheless, he is confounding internal semantic contexts (the ideal validity of a claim) and external factual ones (duration and stability of factual rule). He is mixing up a term for validity with one for classification. The more stable the ruler's power, the greater his (or her) moral authority and legitimacy. Here a factual judgment and a value judgment are being confused.

The jumping between categories has been glossed over by expressions such as “torrent” and “blind, all-inclusive power.”

We are faced with an inconsistency or pseudo-argumentation typical of al-Gaddafi, one based on a muddling of basic terms. That is also interesting here because in *The Green Book*, as we shall see, the combination of tautologies and contradictions is systematized to the point of hermeneutic fraud; consequently, the work of interpretation exhausts itself in explaining how these inconsistencies come about. Here is an example from al-Gaddafi’s *Green Book*, which is also about the legitimacy of a regime: “The worst dictatorships the world has seen existed in the shadow of parliaments.”⁷

What causes the author of *The Green Book* to make such statements? He intensifies it by his paradoxical thesis that it is precisely the direct democratic element of a referendum on fundamental issues that unmasks parliamentarism as an arbitrary system. “Referendums are a betrayal of democracy. When one says *yes* and *no*, one has not really articulated one’s will but has been restrained by the conception of modern democracy. One is only allowed to utter a single word: *yes* or *no*! This is the most extreme and harsh system of dictatorial repression there is.”⁸

This superlative allegation of violence can only be understood if we see through it as a fundamentalistic attempt by al-Gaddafi to lend his own tribal life-world ultra-stability and an exclusive claim to validity when compared with formalized types of legitimation in modern parliamentary democracies. To the author of *The Green Book*, what is truly democratic is only the kinship system; it is primordial, substantial, tangible, and (most of all) endlessly superior to other social formations. It confounds the social world and the objective one in sociocentric fashion. In al-Gaddafi’s *prereflective* worldview, democracy can neither be organized nor categorized. Societies are more despotic the more they are removed evolutionarily from this model of a world structured around kinship. Therefore, in a moral sense, parliamentary democracies fall short of the developmental stage of even restrictive autocratic regimes. The more formalized its areas for action and the more difficult the path to a decision, the more despotic the system

⁷ Gaddafi, *The Green Book*, Part I, “Parliaments.”

⁸ Ibid., Part I, “Plebiscites.”

of rule will be. At the same time, al-Gaddafi cannot fail to recognize the progress of democracy in human history, particularly when claiming to have found the definitive democratic solution for the problems of humanity. The word “definitive” accordingly appears seventeen times in *The Green Book*. As in al-Gaddafi’s story “Escape to Hell,” his notion of social structures that are eternal and tribal does not measure legitimacy against some ideal validity or acknowledged value of social norms; instead, the crude factuality of those structures is all-important.

Emerging from this coincidence of facts and validity is the leveling of all distinctions. With respect to hermeneutics, this means suspending the difference between democratic and despotic systems of rule, and between power and violence, at the political level. It also means that the benchmark for actions has been lost, on the social level. As a result, perpetrator and victim become indistinguishable. The demands of the urban populace for the attainments of civilization (“build us another house, create for us a better connection, build us a road in the sea”) appear so monstrous and apocalyptic that they rob the protagonist of his soul, making hell seem more enjoyable than fulfilling such demands.

Despots are not despots; the city is hell; hell is heaven. And the democratically elected American president Richard Nixon is included in the illustrious ranks of historical tyrants—not on account of his deeds but because he was removed from power. Against this background, it is easier to understand al-Gaddafi’s reply to a journalist who asked him what was the most absurd accusation ever made against him. The answer? “That I am a dictator and terrorist.” This man, then, who set about to construct the most repressive police state in the Arab world, should be taken at his word. Just how this relates to his Bedouin mentality and his archaic worldview will be explained in my discussion below of his *Green Book*.

4. STORIES ON THE HOSTILITY OF MODERNITY AND THE BACKWARDNESS OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

The remaining eleven stories in the volume *The Village, the Village, the Earth, the Earth, and the Suicide of the Astronaut* are less noteworthy for our subject matter here. Overall, they are more than the string of pseudo-

philosophical trivialities that many reviewers see in them. Each narrative exhibits more or less pronounced autobiographical characteristics.

The first four essayistic chapters—"The City," "The Village," "The Earth," and "The Suicide of the Astronaut"—address the destructive consequences of civilization. In a prototypical exaggeration, the idyll of country and village is juxtaposed with the ugly, inhuman, and hostile features of modern life. The city is anonymous and confining ("prohibitions, repressions, impediments, and limitations"), as well as uncaring, hectic, superficial, unclean, deracinated, poisoned, and dishonest ("the entire city consists of deceptive appearances"). In contrast, the village is humane, caring, harmonious, free from external compulsion, and filled with natural beauty ("The moon has a mind, the sight of the sky is a treat and the horizon is visible").

What is implausible is to assert that the city is "a nightmare of life, with no joy"; otherwise, "it would have been designed for that from the outset." Skewed comparisons can be detected here, too: "The city is a graveyard of social connections and relations. Whoever sets foot in it will be forced to swim over its waves from one street to another, from one quarter to another, from one job to another, from one friend to another." (3f.)

To float on the waves of a grave is not an image that is easy to intuit. The reader would be inclined to skim instead of reading these stories if the author did not occasionally succeed with dramatic imagery and formulations that one would not have thought him capable of.

The city is antiproduction, because production requires effort and patience, and the city is antiseriousness and effort. By its nature it wants to take and not to give, consume and not produce; it stretches out in every direction, limitlessly. It becomes a parasite to everything around it, spreading its poisonous tentacles, killing fresh air.... The city coos, shouts, roars, and growls until the noise becomes deafening, and causes headaches, tension. (11)

Such writing borders on kitsch when describing the idyll of village and country. "People in the village and the countryside will always remain linked by social bonds, connected in all moral and material matters. Chil-

dren are free to have fun and grow, they are children of the sun and moon, or breezes and winds" (19).

"The Earth," an essay two-and-a-half-pages long, is a call to preserve creation ("do not smash this unique container which is irreplaceable"). In "The Suicide of the Astronaut," a space traveler returns from a mission during which he has searched in vain for signs of life. He has become so alienated from his natural foundations that he commits suicide when he cannot find a new vocation to sustain himself. In another story, al-Gaddafi makes fun of the illiteracy of ordinary people, a circumstance that impedes political and cultural progress. The panegyric admirer of premodern life becomes in this instance an ironic critic of reactionary traditionalism.

"Death" is a strongly autobiographical piece of fiction. Of all the stories in the collection, it is the most beautiful, most touching, and most successful in its linguistic clarity. After introductory thoughts on whether death is male or female, the author recounts very personally and sensitively his father's decades-long struggle against death.

In general, as my father became weaker and weaker, we became tenser and tenser and filled with pain and dread. At times we would cry, while he would smile, at peace within his coma.... Was it death who was the poisonous snake which accosted him in the empty desert and on other occasions? Was death his bitter, recalcitrant enemy, whose arrogance caused his opponent to become more reckless?... But this time, my father did not fight back, as he had done all his life, when he was always victorious, despite the many narrow chances. Thus, death is female, and in this case, one must surrender until the last breath, which is what my father did. (76f.)

In addition, one also finds in this collection three political satires where al-Gaddafi mocks the disunity of Muslims while also deriding various Islamist groups with their petty, unrealistic adherence to old books. The volume concludes with "The Fasting Drummer at Noon," a song praising the caring figure of the "fast drummer," who wakes up Muslims early during the month of Ramadan so that they can eat something before daybreak that will help them fast until sunset. One may surmise that al-Gaddafi is portraying himself here.

5. IMMUNITY AGAINST MODERNITY —THE *GREEN BOOK* AS AN ESCAPIST MYTH

While the literary work of the Libyan leader is largely unknown, his *Green Book* (published between 1976 and 1979) has achieved relative notoriety, even renown beyond the circle of those whom have dealt with it. This is partially due to al-Gaddafi's extensive propaganda activities. The World Center for the Study and Research of *The Green Book* managed at great financial expense in Tripoli, is supposed to encourage other peoples and states to adopt al-Gaddafi's ideas. From there, the distribution of *The Green Book*—translated into some fifty languages—was managed, and world-wide symposia on the work were organized. At the same time, the attribute "green" in the title and the book's content, referred to as the "Third Universal Theory," have nourished the illusion in the West that this son of the desert was presenting an authentic, and somehow alternative, political theory of the Third World. Instead of keeping its expectations open for something culturally unfamiliar, the Western reception of *The Green Book* by scholars and journalists moved in two directions: Either it was denounced as ridiculous, inconsequential, and clueless, or it was misunderstood as a political text, be it pragmatic or utopian in nature. These descriptivist positions of an external observer understand the doctrine of *The Green Book* to be a methodically ordered set of truth-capable statements that can be either refuted or confirmed as such.

By contrast, it is easy to discern the hermetic character of *The Green Book*, its inaccessibility to those unfamiliar with Libyan culture, the systematic incoherence of its capacity for reasoning and meaning, and the way it presumes a closed worldview and a narrative mythology. For myths are not discursive theories. They do not help in clarifying arguments but instead in forming identities. They thus resemble religious beliefs in their irrefutability. They cannot be wrong; at most, they are deemed inadequate or inappropriate.

Habermas' theory of communication is capable of clarifying exactly the relationship between legitimation, intelligibility, and an illusory interpretation of the world.⁹ At the low level of productive forces in archaic

⁹ Lohmann, *Strukturen mythischen Denkens*, 82ff.

societies, purposive activity is anchored in the values and norms of their life-worlds. Only in that way do the activities necessary for material reproduction come about. Similarly, objective needs are linked to higher-level ideas and values used to substantiate them. The conservation of the system is thus closely tied to knowledge of the tradition that guarantees identity. Such knowledge is threatened by unfamiliar worldviews because its holistic head start on interpretation does not include such dissonant experiences. Those are experiences which overwhelm the traditional worldview's potential for validation and justification and which therefore cannot be suitably processed.

Premodern societies require a type of immunization inasmuch as they are vulnerable at their normative foundations. An identity conflict that arises through the dissonant experience of unfamiliar creeds and ways of life poses a risk that cannot be completely suppressed. Yet such a conflict, due to its critical potential, is not permitted to openly come to light. It has to be intercepted and blocked unconsciously, i.e., by means of illusion. This transpires by means of the typical cognitive limitations of concrete thinking. Linguistically constituted worldviews thereby satisfy a stabilizing function; they interpret the world in a manner that ensures unity; they are a means of coping with key identity-threatening conflicts.¹⁰ Such a conflict may ensue, for example, when an archaic society has a disappointing confrontation with modernity. But myth-based worldviews are able to cope with such conflicts by confounding aspects of meaning and experience, i.e., they do not draw a precise distinction between interpretations of the world and reality itself. That *from which* kinspeople in archaic societies derive their interpretative acts (i.e., from their own factual life-world) coincides with that *about which* communication becomes possible in the first place. This kind of concretism eliminates from knowledge used communicatively the counterfactual moment—neutralized with respect to time and space—of the imperfect, the ideal, and the hypothetical. To characterize this mechanism of an internal excommunicating of problematical contents, Habermas has used the concept of systematically distorted communication.¹¹ These distor-

¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

¹¹ Ibid., 82ff.

tions are built into the basic terminology of a linguistic worldview, i.e., the terms for what counts as an objective fact, a social norm, a subjective experience, and a linguistic understanding. Consequently, the world is being interpreted by means of illusion to the extent mythic worldviews interpret social relations as ancestral relationships. These worldviews function as normative barriers to communication, safeguarding the illusory interpretation and management of conflict against contingencies, and doing so by means of contradiction, criticism, and new experiences. Expressions of sociocentric-mythical worldviews are not incomprehensible or nonsensical per se; rather, they are immediately clear to those who share the same worldview. The cognitive, moral-practical and expressive contents of cultural knowledge are nonnegotiable in a manner that is as inspiring as it is opaque because these contents are intertwined in guaranteeing identity. To kinspeople, the opacity of their cultural expressions is at a prereflective level because they draw on essential terms for comprehending the world.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear why *The Green Book* cannot achieve a coherent definition of what is social. For it overextends a potential for justification where belonging to the tribe is represented ontologically as a trait that can never be lost, has no alternative and is timeless. In the mid-1970s, when *The Green Book* originated, the English cultural anthropologist John Davis located in the Libyan tribe of the Zuwaya a conflict-management strategy that he designates as the “illusion of continuity.” In situations of conflict with state authorities, the kinspeople of Zuwaya would detemporalize their social system of kinship relations, rendering it a social structure that was highly stable and free from institutional control. To describe their escape from far-reaching conflicts, Davis deploys the German phrase *Drang nach Ewigkeit* (yearning for eternity),¹² speaking of an “ad hoc approach to eternity and salvation.”¹³

¹² John Davis, *Libyan Politics: Tribe and Revolution: An Account of the Zuwaya and their Government* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1987), 238.

¹³ Ibid., 178.

6. THE WRITER AS DESTROYER AND REDEEMER OF THE WORLD: “ONE OF MY WORDS CAN DESTROY OR SAVE THE WORLD”

Before I sketch out how the structures of *The Green Book* manage to justify the escapist rationalization of a conflict, I would like to visualize just how (and under what conditions) its illusory, temporary evasions into timelessness operate at the micro-level, i.e., in al-Gaddafi's interpersonal management of conflict. It is important to get to know this mentality so as to understand the not-so-obvious connection between al-Gaddafi's despotism and his written works. Consider, for instance, his remarkable interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in Libya in 1979. There, in slow motion (so to speak), one is able to experience how the Bedouin al-Gaddafi's generosity and gentlemanliness abruptly turn into a fantasy of destruction and redemption, to the extent that he sees his honor as a man and author wounded in the midst of an escalating conflict situation.

To understand this conflict situation, one must start by describing how interview scene then becomes a tribunal. In it, two people collide who could hardly have been more different in their personal lives, cultural backgrounds, and moral temperaments. Al-Gaddafi is the charismatic orator, ruler, brute, Bedouin, and man who does not brook any contradiction and who has never ventured beyond the cultural horizon of his desert state. He wishes to be feared and admired—in a word to be *respected* (which is closely linked to the Bedouin mentality). He surrounds himself in public with female bodyguards. In the interview, he does everything to impress his Italian interlocutor. Dressed in a picturesque, graceful Bedouin garment, he welcomes her at a highly secured military encampment.

At the same time, there is Fallaci, a star reporter, a Western, enlightened, emancipated, and well-traveled woman who has unsparingly interviewed numerous prominent personalities in the domains of politics, culture, and scholarship. She is not in the least impressed with al-Gaddafi's martial and picturesque stage management. While she has no illusions concerning his political power and duties, the journalist does not stop to make pleasantries but gets straight to business. She casts doubt on al-Gaddafi's popularity in Libya and his supposedly good reputation in the global community; then, she compares him with Hitler and Mussolini. Further, she takes him to task for questionable political measures and statements.

She remains firm, intolerant of evasions, and makes al-Gaddafi address his contradictions. When confronted with patent falsehoods, she responds with irony or derision.

Al-Gaddafi defends himself against (perceived) attacks on his honor as a man and political leader. Yet his attempts to parry Fallaci's relentless questioning bounce right back at him. In this tense confrontation, what finally prevails in him is the pride of the Bedouin; he attempts to maintain the upper hand, however he can, against feelings of humiliation and disrespect or the (perceived) violation of his dignity or self-image. In an obsessive effort to disclose no weaknesses, no lies, and no failures—while also evading responsibility—he increasingly gets defensive, descending into an ever more drastic spiral of dishonor, followed by revenge and then self-aggrandizement. It is fascinating and instructive to watch how he enters an irrational maelstrom when defending himself; he is ultimately only able to rescue himself by means of a muddled fantasy of powerlessness and omnipotence, as well as by escaping into delusions of world redemption and destruction.

Forced into the corner and at an impasse between *murū'a* (generosity) and *tarallub* (striving for dominance), he makes his first attempt to dodge Fallaci:

Qaddafi: But I thought that you had come here to talk about my *Green Book* and instead since we met all you asked about is Iran, embassies, diplomats who are being held hostage, Amin and so forth. I answered your questions out of courtesy but, frankly, these are matters which bore me profoundly.

But instead of showing a respectful interest in *The Green Book*, Fallaci resorts to irony, thereby chipping away at the charismatic (but prickly) author and politician:

Fallaci: Colonel, since you don't consider yourself a dictator, and not even a president, not even a minister, tell me, what are you?

Qaddafi: I am the leader of the revolution. How evident that you did not read my *Green Book*.

Fallaci: On the contrary, I read it. It doesn't take very long, you know, 15 minutes at the most. It's so small. My powder compact is bigger than your little *Green Book*.

At this point, al-Gaddafi's defensiveness begins to take on irrational features. He starts by representing Libya as a realm of freedom, in accordance with *The Green Book*. When Fallaci then confronts him with the reality that officers and students had been executed two years earlier, the author of *The Green Book* finds himself agitated by her irony, culminating in an apocalyptic evasion in the direction of destructive megalomania:

Qaddafi: *The Green Book* is the product of the struggle of mankind. *The Green Book* is the guide to the emancipation of man. *The Green Book* is the gospel. The new gospel. The gospel of the new era, the era of the masses.

Fallaci: You're not very humble, are you?

Qaddafi: No, I'm not humble. Because I can resist the attacks of the entire world and because *The Green Book* has resolved the problems of humanity and of society.

Fallaci: Well, then, you're a kind of messiah. The new messiah.

Qaddafi: I don't see myself in those terms. But *The Green Book* is the new gospel, I repeat. In your gospels it's written: "In the beginning there was the word." *The Green Book* is the word. One of its words can destroy the world. Or save it. Carter can wage any war against us: to defend itself, the third world only needs my *Green Book*. My word. One word and the whole world could blow up. The value of things could change. And their weight. And their volume. Everywhere and forever.

Fallaci: Do you believe in God?

Qaddafi: Of course, why do you ask me such a question?

Fallaci: Because I thought that you were God.

(End of the interview)¹⁴

In order to understand this conflict management, it is essential to know the mentality of *tarallub*. In its Bedouin context, the Arabic term *tarallub* (overpowering, mastery of a situation) signifies the attempt to gain the upper hand in every conflict, to win in every situation, to augment one's honor and that of the tribe. The Iraqi sociologist al-Wardi makes a case

¹⁴ Oriana Fallaci, "Iranians Are Our Brothers': An Interview with Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi," *New York Times Magazine*, 16 December 1979, <http://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/16/archives/iranians-are-our-brothers-an-interview-with-col-muammar-elqaddafi.html> (January 13, 2016).

“that the core of Bedouin culture or its general nature can be described with a single word, the word *at-tarallub* [wanting to prevail].” Al-Wardi uses the mentality of *tarallub* to explicate the assertive will of the Bedouin and his aversion to any form of authority or rule: “In the depth of his heart, the Bedouin wants ... to be superior, not inferior; he wants to prevail through his power, the power of his tribe, and his *murū’a* [masculinity, chivalry, pride, and generosity].”¹⁵

In this conflict with his interviewer, al-Gaddafi evidently does not distinguish between real and imaginary capacities. In his fantasy of destruction and salvation, the physical destruction of the world and the revolutionizing of its symbolic orders get muddled up. The writer becomes a demiurge and world destroyer at one and the same time—a powerful exaggerated opinion of a book author, magically blurring the boundaries of what is possible. Against this background, it is understandable that al-Gaddafi imagines that he predicted the end of communism in his *Green Book*. He also imagines that the Libyan Revolution of 1969 was the successor and consummation of the French Revolution. And he imagines that Libya is ruled by direct democracy, based on the ideas in his book. And so on and so forth.

There are primarily four features that set the Libyan leader apart in the eyes of the world: rigor (to the point of violence), megalomania, unpredictability, and scurrility (“I am the leader of the Arab leaders, the king of the kings of Africa, and the imam of the Muslims”). The Bedouin tradition of *tarallub* favors the development of personality structures referred to as “archaic grandiosity” by Heinz Kohut, the pioneer of research on narcissism. The individual affected is guided by a “primitive megalomania”; he cannot distinguish between real and imaginary capacities. The cultural analogy of this psychological profile can be located not only in al-Gaddafi’s eccentric appearances but also in the boundless meaning that he attributes to his *Green Book* and himself as its author. This is where writing and despotism interface for al-Gaddafi, both as analysis and realpolitik. He is making an absolute truth claim that rests on a misleading interpretation of the world, of himself, and of language. In the face of the totality of this claim, his entire world is unsettled by every criticism of institutions provided with de facto power, as well as of *The Green Book* and its author.

¹⁵ Ali al-Wardi, *Soziologie des Nomadentums* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1972), 60.

7. THE “THIRD UNIVERSAL THEORY” OF *THE GREEN BOOK* —A PSEUDO-ARGUMENTATION

The original Arabic-language edition of *The Green Book* was published in Libya between 1976 and 1979 in three successive parts. In keeping with its own claim, *The Green Book* understands itself as a universal conception of justice. Its author takes it upon himself both to explain and solve the political, economic, social, and cultural problems of both traditional and modern societies. In its external form of presentation, *The Green Book* treats these political, economic, social and cultural problems in three chapters. These all have programmatic headings that relate to three subsystems: administrative power, economics, and the social-integrative force of solidarity in one’s life-world. Each of these (in their corresponding differentiation) represents a characteristic feature of modern societies. A listing of the chapter and section headings provides the following portrait (there is no table of contents in the original Arabic edition):

Part 1: The Solution to the Problem of Democracy: Democracy. Popular Power. The Political Basis of the Third Universal Theory

- The Ruler
- Parliaments
- The Party
- Class
- Plebiscites
- Popular Conferences and People’s Committees
- The Law of Society
- The Press

Part 2: The Economic Basis of the Third Universal Theory

- Need
- Housing
- Income
- Transportation
- The Land
- Examples of Wage Labor for the Benefit of Society, of Wage Labor for Private Benefit, and of Work without Pay
- Domestic Servants

Part 3: The Social Basis of the Third Universal Theory

- The Family
- The Tribe
- The Nation
- Woman
- Minorities
- Education
- Music and Art
- Sport, Horsemanship, and the Stage

Presumably, it is this pretense of a methodological basis that has led the vast majority of interpreters to accept that the book is theoretical and not some pseudo-argumentative myth, i.e., that there is merely a gradual difference but not a categorical one in the way it is substantiated. On account of the outward impression of how this content is ordered, *The Green Book* seems to move not only on the level of basic concepts at the differentiating level of modern societies; rather, it also suggests formal features of al-Gaddafi's interpretive efforts. This methodological structure and a certain degree of semantic and systematic precision lead one to expect a relatively theoretical foundation for assigning the problem. Moreover, one expects this foundation will be a rational one, based on the text's use of terms such as *popular sovereignty*, *power struggle*, *state*, *law*, *world community*, *press freedom*, *wage work*, *property relations*, *means of production*, *profit*, *exploitation*, *religion*, *tradition*, *art*, *culture*, *theater*, *language*, *sports*, etc.

To begin with, I will explain what I mean when I characterize *The Green Book* as a borderline case for hermeneutics. As I have said, *The Green Book* avoids the pressures of an unresolved identity problem in the face of a pluralistic world, by excommunicating the other thematically and operating like an internal censor. Through a forced coordination of semantics, the true nature of the problem is obscured; it can only crop up conditionally, i.e., under encryption. As a result, the culturally valid illusion can be created and maintained that the world is unified in a tangible manner. The desymbolizing of terms helps—as shown in the following example—to produce similarities by analogy and thus to present evidence that humanity is a family on a world scale. “The tribe is a family that has grown through procreation; the tribe is therefore a large family. The *’umma* is a

tribe that has grown through procreation; the *‘umma* is therefore a large tribe. The world is an *‘umma* that has branched out through reproduction; the world is therefore a large *‘umma*.”¹⁶

This genealogical pattern of interpretation functions according to mythic analogies: Nothing is so different that it cannot be interrelated to something else. Consequently, what is identical and similar, or general and particular, comes to operate on the same level. The analogical formula goes like this: family = tribe, tribe = *‘umma*; *‘umma* = world. Ergo: family = world, i.e., humanity is a family on a global scale. Al-Gaddafi’s terms for identifying social entities grasp them as totalities unlimited in their scope, i.e., there are synonyms that denote nothing and connote everything. Accordingly, all As are Bs; all Bs are Cs; and therefore, all As are Cs (following the syllogism, “all humans are mammals; all dogs are mammals; therefore, all dogs are humans”). Similarity is mistaken for identity, and partial identity for total identity:

The relations between the individual and a group are social relationships; there are mutual relations within a *qawm* [tribe]. The basis on which the *qawm* is formed is the *qawmiya*.... The relationships within the *qawm* are social ones. “Social” derives from the group; there are mutual relations within the group. *Qawmiya* is derived from *qawm*; there are the mutual relations within the *qawm*. Thus, social relations are relationships within the *qawm*, and relationships within the *qawm* are social relationships. For the group is a *qawm*, and the *qawm* is the group, even when one is smaller than the other.¹⁷

At this point, the reader may already have been seized by a hermeneutic vertigo. These tautological definitions that simply subsume the social under the term *qawm* explain nothing while also suspending the differences between types of societies in their differing scopes and complexities. “Social,” “*qawm*,” and “group” are interchangeable terms, whose symbolic meaning stands in a concretistic relation to the “natural sociality” of represented facts. This arbitrariness in choosing synonymous terms represents a key feature of *The Green Book*. The supporting terms for identifying social

¹⁶ Gaddafi, *The Green Book*, Part 3, “The Tribe.”

¹⁷ Ibid., Part 3, [introduction].

diversity do not serve to clarify what is meant but instead to validate identity by means of narration and suggestion. The notion that the family is the starting point and ultimate goal of explaining the world restricts logical operations to a self-referential circle.

The following excerpt shows how far desymbolization, or semantic erosion, goes in *The Green Book*.

The *sunna* of the dictatorial ruler has taken the place of the natural *sunna*. The positively *qawanin* ["laws"; plural of *qanun*] took the place of the natural *qawanin* and thus forfeited those standards. A human is a human everywhere, one and the same in character and feelings; therefore, the natural *qanun* was a logical *namus* for human beings as such. Then the constitutions came as positive *qawanin* that did not regard human beings as equals. For this opinion, there is no justification other than the will of the ruler—whether it be an individual, a committee, a class, or a party—to rule peoples.¹⁸

The same term denotes its opposite as well; conversely, two different terms have the same referents. Through this alternating (and anticonceptual) homonymy and synonymy, what is unfamiliar is neutralized. Yet what is undermined is the counterfactual confrontation with the reality of politically organized societies, a confrontation that calls into question one's own identity.

Having been divested of their ideality, these desymbolized total terms are real substitutes for the family. That is why they are randomly interchangeable: "Religion includes tradition, and tradition is an expression of the natural life of peoples. Therefore, the tradition that includes religion is a confirmation of the natural *qanun*. The nonreligious *shara'i*" [plural of *sharia*] not based on tradition are heretical innovations of humans against humans. They are consequently unlawful because they are deprived of the natural source, namely tradition and religion."¹⁹

The argumentative circle of this explanation of social relations arises out of the synonymy of the terms *religion*, *tradition*, *natural life of peoples*, and *natural "qanun"* that are said to "include," "express," or "confirm one

¹⁸ Ibid., Part 1, "The Law of Society."

¹⁹ Ibid.

another. In this case also, the suggestive power of an identity-forming vocabulary is substituted for differentiating terms; hence, the “natural life of peoples” recalls the freedom of nomadic units.

I would now like to clarify how the overlap between the text and al-Gaddafi’s real despotism is reflected in the justification structures of *The Green Book*. Thus, a normative validity that scarcely differentiates between objectivity, normativity, and authenticity results in a performative contradiction regarding the theoretical and factual exclusivity of direct democracy: “All of the systems of rule in today’s world are undemocratic as long as they do not conform to this method [i.e., that of the “people’s congresses” explicated in *The Green Book*].”²⁰

We have this statement already in the formulation “The worst dictatorships the world has seen existed in the shadow of parliaments.” Al-Gaddafi condemns all systems of rule that have cut themselves off from the archaic self-legitimation of a tribal society—ranging from autocratic despotism to Western-style representative democracy—as equally undemocratic. If the kinship system depicts an objective world order and joins together with linguistic communication to form an essentialist claim to exclusivity—a coincidence thus of theory and practice—then theories of democracy are not inadequate or unrealizable but as undemocratic as the systems they describe: “Democracy has only one method and one theory. The diversity and dissimilarity of the systems that claim to be democratic just goes to show that they are undemocratic.”²¹

It is obvious just how al-Gaddafi is contradicting himself with this claim to totality. It is itself part of the pluralism that he cites as evidence of the falseness of all self-proclaimed models of democratic societies. In an ambivalent (i.e., descriptive-evaluative) manner, direct democracy in *The Green Book* is therefore as “true” (= existing) and simultaneously “false” (= incorrect) as all other models. Belonging and alienation, inclusivity and exclusivity are set aside. There are no specific conditions of democracy that allow a little leeway for different ideas or ways of life, as little as there are more or less equitable forms of coexistence. Here the implicit strategy of an illusory interpretation of the world becomes apparent: what is deemed

²⁰ Ibid., Part 1, “Popular Conferences and People’s Committees.”

²¹ Ibid.

threatening or unfamiliar is subsumed in the notion of the eternal Bedouin. The suspension of the conditions of inclusion and exclusion transforms the other into something familiar.

In this distorted semantic context, *The Green Book* is not a subjective linguistic production. It is mythic instead, having been supplied with the a priori perfect tense of its object, i.e., always available, and always true. "Therefore, if *The Green Book* says that 'representation is fraud,' then that was not written by a person but is directly inspired."²² "One should not regard *The Green Book* as if I had composed these intuitively self-evident and eternal sayings."²³ "When we say, 'No democracy without people's congresses,' who can think and write that, and who could say so and so wrote that?"²⁴ In a text without an author, form and content coalesce; such a work can be neither interpreted nor criticized.

8. *THE GREEN BOOK*

AS AN INSTRUMENT OF LEGITIMATION AND REPRESSION

This absolute truth claim, expressed in a "final" and no longer interpretable language, has pragmatic political consequences for the legitimization of al-Gaddafi's rule. In Libya, *The Green Book* enjoys the status of a political constitution. In the basis of it, al-Gaddafi and his clique have held power since 1969. Political and economic measures have been justified; political undesirables have been persecuted. A systematic attempt has been made to subject Libyan society to the norms of *The Green Book*. The arbitrary character of the actions justified by the book ensues from the fact that it is astonishingly unintelligible by Western standards and that it is marked by hermeneutic randomness. In spite of the honorable direct democratic idea of the people's Jamahiriya, the ruling clique has created a surveillance and espionage state, one in which there are no independent unions, no parties, no civil society, and no middle class.

²² MFÉ, vol. 42, 154.

²³ Ibid., 155.

²⁴ Ibid.

By way of contrast, it seems paradoxical that the leader of the Libyan state—even during the uprising against him—never tired of asserting that the people ruled Libya, and that he held no political office and could therefore not resign. How was the military dictator al-Gaddafi able to make his subordinates believe that his regime and the political system in Libya corresponded to the ideal of direct democratic participation in *The Green Book*—at least once his pomp and extravagance as well as his use of political repression became obvious? This question has to be looked at in the context of the Libyan myth of freedom from rule. This paradoxical legitimation can be explained by the remarkable consistency between that myth and the observations of *The Green Book*. If al-Gaddafi's claim to legitimacy could only be enforced by potential sanctions or was not internally linked to a culturally approved rationale, he would not have been able, even for a short period, to assume or actually achieve a certain degree of understanding for his counterfactual assertion that Libyan society would have a direct democratic structure.

The belief held by large numbers of the Libyan people, that the exercise of power by al-Gaddafi and his Revolutionary Command Council were to continue the tradition of nomadic Bedouin freedom from rule, owes a great deal to the structural possibilities of ideology and illusion formation that inhere in that belief. It is the culturally valid sociocentric belief in eternity and in the meta-social ranking of kinship solidarity, which the propagandist al-Gaddafi both shares and exploits politically when he declares his despotic rule to be in conformity with the direct democratic ideal of *The Green Book*, as well as when he claims the book is one of the grand cultural achievements and political events of human history. Contrary to the promises of the Libyan revolutionaries, however, the establishment of people's congresses and people's committees—presented in *The Green Book* as a world-historical ultimate solution—takes place in Libya in a pseudo-democratic fashion at the politically insignificant local level. It does not affect any far-reaching or really important decisions; these are reserved to al-Gaddafi, his clique, and the groups designated and controlled by him.

In no other North African country is the tension between a propagated norm of freedom and political praxis as contradictory as it is in Libya. Behind a facade of direct democracy, al-Gaddafi conceals his absolute

power, which is otherwise unmatched in North Africa. Moreover: in no other North African country is the *topos* of freedom from rule, as a counterfactual model for solving problems, as strongly rooted in collective memory as in Libya where urbanization did not commence in a structurally significant way until the 1960s as the revenues from oil reserves began to rise. In Libya, it is paradoxically the power holders themselves, the representatives of an authoritarian regime, who attempt to justify their institutionalized position of power by using the tribal egalitarianism of a still-thriving Bedouin past. This ambivalent attitude toward the state is something the power holders share with the populace against the historical backdrop of a glorified Bedouin past free from rule.

9. ARCHAIC FUNDAMENTALISM

Are al-Gaddafi's beliefs, as outlined in *The Green Book*, fundamentalist? Inasmuch as the book consistently suspends relations of social inclusivity and exclusivity, it qualifies to be interpreted as an expression of a fundamentalist worldview; it allows no leeway for reflecting on its relationship to unfamiliar worldviews. Although *The Green Book* also claims exclusivity for a privileged way of life, it is nonetheless different, precisely because it levels out this exclusivity in a strategic and theoretical manner. It can further be distinguished in its pristine sociocentrism from that traditionalistic fundamentalism which emerged in response to an overwhelming social modernization and which is materializing as a contemporary (counter) movement for renewal.

The Green Book differs too in its level of development. For the ideal validity of a better society cannot prevail communicatively against the factual validity of kinship norms. The life-world being *explicated*, but not *proposed*, in *The Green Book*, is a ritual one, i.e., it is protected in its identity-guaranteeing core through internal barriers in a communicative potential for negation and renewal. Cultural innovation, regardless of what kind, excludes al-Gaddafi's fundamentalism. As a consequence, his direct democracy is not oriented retrospectively *or* prospectively; rather, it lives in the eternal present of mythical-genealogical beginnings.

While traditionalistic fundamentalism seeks to imitate a substantiality that has long since deteriorated, the fundamentalism of *The Green Book* draws on the pristine substantiality of primordial conditions of recognition; these are still immediately present (in society and culture) while at the same time quintessentially mythic: i.e., they are precategoryal, detemporalized, and unchallengeable, while presenting no alternatives. In structural terms, the *illusion of the eternal Bedouin* is not a modern ideology; on the contrary, it is an interpretative model of a way of life that may be in transition but is still current as a social experience. Al-Gaddafi himself was born in a Bedouin tent in the desert and saw the familial bonds there as a primordial experience of the world and a model of order. The magic of such archaic bonds indicates why *The Green Book* lacks the structural possibilities for cultivating that utopian or restorative feature which is oriented on the better past and which is particular to traditionalistic fundamentalism.

The modern fundamentalist *ideology* of politically instrumentalizing religious beliefs contrasts with al-Gaddafi's monogenetic *illusion* of a family of humanity. For the ideology *consciously* refrains from asserting itself with reasons against the competing claims to validity of different worldviews, while *The Green Book*—which argues at the level of a preverbal integrated society—does not at all have such reasons at its disposal.

The way of life illuminated by al-Gaddafi may produce the advantage of a continuous integration and the absence of a systemic violence to social relations by using its egalitarianism toward those societies which have been uprooted and fragmented by modernization. As a model for pluralistic societies, this way of life is lacking the universalist perspective of an ideal communicative society where a reasonable solution to the problem becomes apparent of how a civilized argument over beliefs can take place, without one of the parties having to give up its claim to legitimacy.

The originality of *The Green Book* is not to be found in its formulations of a coherent doctrine or the cognitive content of its statements. It is situated instead in the semantic potential of its mythic worldview. It reflects the authenticity of a way of life that al-Gaddafi illustrates in a manner that is highly oblivious to ambiguity and contradiction. Its high degree of linguistic encryption indicates to Western commentators the degree to which

the interpretation of world it contains is in danger and in need of immunization. As a theoretical system of descriptive statements, *The Green Book* is not profound. Instead, it is to be approached as an all-encompassing complex of beliefs in which a particularistic way of life and a specific identity are articulated.

Translated by David A. Brenner

Saddam Hussein (1937–2006)

“Unbind It” (2007)

Unbind your soul. It is my soul mate and you are my soul's beloved.
No house could have sheltered my heart as you have
If I were that house, you would be its dew
You are the soothing breeze
My soul is made fresh by you
And our Baath Party blossoms like a branch turns green.
The medicine does not cure the ailing but the white rose does.
The enemies set their plans and traps
And proceeded despite the fact they are all faulty.
It is a plan of arrogance and emptiness
It will prove to be nothing but defeated
We break it as rust devours steel
Like a sinner consumed by his sins
We never felt weak
We were made strong by our morals.
Our honorable stand, the companion of our soul,
The enemies forced strangers into our sea
And he who serves them will be made to weep.
Here we unveil our chests to the wolves
And will not tremble before the beast.
We fight the most difficult challenges
And beat them back, God willing.
How would they fare under such strains?
All people, we never let you down
And in catastrophes, our party is the leader.
I sacrifice my soul for you and for our nation
Blood is cheap in hard times
We never kneel or bend when attacking
But we even treat our enemy with honor.¹

¹ Saddam Hussein, “Unbind It,” *New York Times*, 4 January 2007, http://www.ny-times.com/2007/01/04/world/middleeast/04stext.html?_r=0 (January 13, 2016).

The Principle of Single-Handed Tyranny: On Saddam Hussein's Literary Works

BURKHARD MÜLLER

Huddled around a table, the three of us struggle to translate the short text into German. It's not just that I don't understand it, or that I am unable to read the Arabic script—I can't even recognize the individual letters. "Penned by Saddam Hussein in his prison and given to his lawyer for publication. Here it comes...." We are ready to begin.

أما وقد جار الزمان علي *Treated unjustly by time*
وفي الآخر العدا خاسرينا *At the end of the race, we are the losers*
وأظلمت ديار كانت منورة *And once-lit cities were thrown into darkness*
بل أظلم عراق الهدى حاديننا *And Iraq became a pathfinder to its neighbors in this gloom*

Iraq—a pathfinder? What could that mean? A better translation, Leila and Yusuf explain, would be "caravan leader." In other words, Iraq leads the way and the other camels follow. Of course, the word "camel" lacks any derogatory connotations in Arabic. The neighbors referred to in this instance could include countries such as Iran.

وأجفلت بعد ان كانت آمنة *The >cities<, once places of safety, were struck by terror*
وعلى الرؤوس غبارها والطينا *Dust and mud fell upon heads*

Dust can fall on one's head—that much is clear. But mud? Mud rarely falls from above. Is our translation skewed? Or the image? Neither, I soon learn. Apparently it is common in Arab countries to rub earth on one's forehead as a sign of mourning. (Later Leila emails me several photographs depicting this practice.)

واشتد غرابها مستكرا ضحيته *Their ravens have grown strong and slandered their victims*

But who are “they”? The author’s omission suggests that their identity is self-evident. The image of a slanderous raven is equally confounding. Leila makes a telephone call to an Arab writer of her acquaintance in London. Leila’s friend, however, is only able to help us so far. “That bastard! That son of a bitch!” she yells into the telephone. “Nobody could possibly understand that! So how am I supposed to?”

ينقر الجوارح منها والعيونا *They pick at their wounds and eyes*
عندها تتأخى النشامى عليها *The brave have banded together*
ومن غيرهم من صعبها يشفيها *And the other countries can heal us*

It might be a reference to Saudi Arabia. Or it might not be. Our efforts to translate the text are exhausting. We work in fits and starts, interrupted by Leila’s exclamations: “This is bullshit! Utter bullshit!”

وارتجف فيها نخوة كل عرق *And they trembled in every vein*

Bullshit or not, it is certainly opaque. The text is composed in Modern Standard Arabic, I learn, but composed in a vernacular style. The import of this revelation eludes me.

يميته العار بها لا البينا *The disgrace kills him (who?), not us*

Not least of all because I am at a loss to understand the lyrical form of Saddam’s text. Does the text reflect a specific form? And if so, how well has the author mastered it? We make another call. This time to a Kurdish writer based in Germany. The four of us come to a unanimous conclusion: while the author’s attempt to emulate a particular form is evident in the “weighting” of some (but not all) of the poem’s lines as a means to distinguish rhyming elements, its execution is poor and amateurish.

وثار باردها يواجه صواعقهم *The daring face their thunderous foes*
ليس سوى الحمية تصد والدينا *Only courage and religion can fend off >the thunder?<*

ودماء برة اعتادت العطاء *Their >the people? the soldiers?< blood is grateful, accustomed only to giving*

Hussein's reference to "grateful blood" seems highly questionable. Leila and Yusuf fled from Saddam Hussein's Iraq thirty-three years ago. They were granted asylum in the German Democratic Republic, and have lived in Chemnitz (formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt) ever since. It was there that they first experienced snowfall, a memory that they still describe as "overwhelming."

وكان صوت الأذان حادينا *The call to prayer guides us*

Their chauffeur was less fortunate. He was taken into custody by the authorities, tortured, and then left for dead outside his family home.

وصوت امرأة العرب بكت *And the voice of the Arab woman cries*

A friend of Leila's stayed on in Iraq after her husband surreptitiously fled the country and hoped to follow him later without attracting any unwanted attention. Then, one day, Saddam appeared at the school where she taught, just as snacks were being served during recess. Hussein was in fine spirits that day. Placing a hand on her arm as she bit into her snack, he asked amicably: "So how is your husband faring?" Leila's friend all but choked. Saddam gave her a pat and remarked: "Finish that mouthful first, girl. Then you can tell me everything!"

وهللت ضد العدو غازينا *And exults against the victorious foe that attacked us*

Relief washes over us when we finally reach the end of the text.

Born in 1937 in the small town of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein was an illegitimate child and was raised by his uncle, a colonel in the Iraqi army. At the age of just nineteen, he committed his first murder at the behest of his tribe—his victim was a distant relative. At twenty-one he was involved in a failed attempt to assassinate the prime minister and was forced to flee the country. He returned to Iraq and fled again before returning once more. This time the coup was a success: in 1968 the Ba'ath Party—his

party—took power for the second time. By the time he was appointed to the office of vice president in 1969, Hussein was the country's *de facto* leader. Whenever the president made a televised announcement, Saddam would stand beside him with a Kalashnikov. The balance of power between the two could not have been clearer. It was not until 1979 that Saddam Hussein was formally appointed president of Iraq and chairman of the Ba'ath Party.

And it was during this time that Leila made his acquaintance. Saddam arrived at her tennis club one day with two rackets tucked under his arm, and explained that she was to have the pleasure of teaching him to play. She could hardly refuse him. At the time, Leila remembers, Saddam was a remarkably charming young man who could sweet-talk people to get what he wanted—but who also liquidated his enemies when it pleased him (a task which he happily attended to in person). Saddam could strike a gallant figure. Once, Leila recounts, he visited a government department, where he jokingly asked staff what they thought of a large painting on the wall of their office. Trembling in fear—the bewildered officials were clueless as to what Saddam wanted to hear—the employees replied with cautious pleasantries and suggested the painting was “quite nice.” But one woman boldly stepped forward, looked him in the eye, and declared: “Mr. Vice President (Saddam always insisted on his title), as pretty as this painting might be, I would much rather that a portrait of yourself be hung in its place!” Saddam snapped his fingers and one of his bodyguards scurried away, only to return with a diamond necklace and a set of matching earrings, which Saddam naturally insisted on personally placing on his admirer.

The emancipation of Iraqi women was another concern in which Hussein personally intervened. The dictator had a hotline established to enable the people of Iraq to contact him, in particular women who suffered domestic violence at the hands of their husbands. According to Leila, rather than assigning this task to a secretary, Saddam took the calls in person, noted the callers' complaints and—as circumstances required—arranged for the husband to be arrested and beaten for several days by police, before being allowed to return home and mend his ways.

Under Saddam Hussein life improved for many Iraqis. The wealth created by the nationalization of Iraq's oil industry in 1973 was invested in

new infrastructure, including new roads, schools, and universities. The literacy rate among young girls rose to 90 percent (according to UNESCO statistics this figure has dropped to 23 percent since the US-led invasion).

The operation of the Iraqi state depended to a large degree on Saddam Hussein's policy of personally attending to a broad range of matters which in any other advanced nation-state would be delegated to government officials and departments—a policy which he applied to both his reform efforts and the elimination of any perceived threats. A dictator's work is never done—or so it must have seemed to the micro-manager Saddam Hussein. In Saddam's Iraq decisions were made not through orderly bureaucratic processes, but at the whim of a single individual. Tyrants of Saddam Hussein's ilk are generally viewed in the West as megalomaniacs, when in fact they are only doing what has to be done to keep the show—their show—on the road. Their apparent delusions of grandeur are rooted in a sweeping sense of responsibility which occupies their every waking moment. This breed of despot is known for its tendency to shoulder immense workloads. They live cautiously and in constant fear of the enemies that one inevitably makes in such a role. Saddam's practice of maintaining dozens of palaces across the country reflected more than just his appetite for luxury; they enabled him to stay on the move and ensured that nobody could be sure of his precise location. He slept four to five hours a night (according to Yusuf), possibly even as little as two to three hours (according to Leila), never waking up in the same bed twice. Despite this, his occupation was not without its hazards. Following in the footsteps of his great role model, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, Saddam frequently roamed the streets of Baghdad at night, rousing his subjects from their slumbers, first sending shivers down their spines, and then astonishing them with his generosity. With Saddam, generosity and terror never lay far apart. He had a habit of making gifts of pricey foreign limousines (white limousines as a rule) fitted with power windows so that the vehicle's occupants would be unable to open the windows and doors by hand if it happened to take a dive into the Tigris. In Iraq you knew what to expect when Saddam gave you a limousine.

But the lonesome strongman bears witness to the inherent weakness of the state: the tyrant, and only the tyrant, can hold everything together. He should have warned the Americans as they marched across the border into

Iraq in 2003: with the overthrow of Saddam and the dissolution of the two organizations that protected his claim to power—the Ba’ath Party and the army—the absence of the institutional infrastructure of the modern state and civil society rendered Iraq a state without a state. The chaos that ensued was predictable.

Saddam’s literary ambitions must also be viewed within the context of this policy of micro-management. Western critics have treated his writing as an expression of pathological hubris; an appraisal that reveals their inability to grasp the idiosyncrasies of this state model. “He was completely out of touch with reality,” diagnosed one journalist. “He thought he was a god who could do anything, including writing novels.” But this raises the question of who, if not Saddam, could have composed the literature so desperately needed in Iraq? Saddam could no more trust the country’s literati than he could his comrades in the army and party leadership, two organizations that he was careful to purge from time to time. In Saddam’s Iraq, independent action could take but one form—that of betrayal. And as the act of reading is hardly amenable to state control, Hussein’s writings were adapted for the stage and audiences compelled to sit through performances. Only the bravest of spectators dared to share their true thoughts in whispers during the intermission.

Things are done differently in the West. According to an article in *Time* magazine, the pop star Bono—a genuine social justice warrior—was once afforded the privilege of accompanying US president George W. Bush aboard his aircraft on a journey to Africa. As it turned out, Bush was astonishingly well informed on the subject of Bono’s new book. Bono, unable to bite back a spiteful remark, inquired: “Who did you get to read it for you, Mr. President?” Bush replied with a grin: “And who did you get to write it for you, Bono?” That’s not bad as far as tit-for-tat responses go. What this spat reveals is that in the higher echelons of power and influence literature is no longer considered a personal matter. This was not the case in Iraq. (It goes without saying that Bono would scarcely have left the airplane alive.)

In addition to his various political writings and numerous poems, Saddam Hussein penned no less than four novels. This is perhaps the Iraqi dictator’s most astonishing quality. It is not unusual for a tyrant to put pen to paper and lay out his political principles. It is hardly surprising then to

learn that under Saddam schoolgirls aged as young as seven were expected to memorize his political maxims. The dictator was also given to blocking off a few hours in his busy schedule from time to time to compose a few lines of verse—and with tyrants being highly productive types, a few hours sufficed. But writing a novel requires considerable commitment. Reading a novel can be an onerous undertaking, but how much more time must one invest in its production? The publication of four novels is an achievement of which any professional author would be proud. And Saddam was not like many of his fellow despots in the states of the former Eastern Bloc, who were born into simple circumstances and made a living as intellectuals on their way to the top—if only because reason still counted for something in these societies. As a rule, tyrants of this type tended to abandon writing the moment they seize power, much like a man who quits dancing soon after his wedding. No, Saddam wrote all four of his novels after he came to power.

He wrote incognito and his books were credited simply as “A book by its author.” Here again we encounter the motif of Harun al-Rashid as he roams the streets of Baghdad unrecognized. As you might expect, steps were taken to ensure that nobody was oblivious to the author’s true identity. All this lent Saddam’s incognito activities a comic aspect reminiscent of Jacques Offenbach’s opéra bouffe *La Périhole*, in which the viceroy of Peru dons a disguise to mingle with his subjects, who dance about him as he sings, “The girls, the girls, oh, aren’t they pretty? Incognito, incognito, incognito, incognito! Ah! If a monarch wants their smiles, let him go once awhile incognito.”

One of these novels has been translated into German as *Zabiba und der König* (Zabiba and the king). Its passage to the West was labyrinthine. While Saddam remained in power, the book was studied by American and Israeli intelligence analysts, who hoped to glean from it valuable insights into the dictator’s state of mind. In the aftermath of Saddam’s defeat, a (self-styled) American patriot commissioned the novel’s translation into English to satisfy his own curiosity and to offer American troops in occupied Iraq and their families a form of light entertainment. In an effort to disavow the slightest hint of moral complicity, a battery of venomous footnotes was added to the text together with the assurance that Saddam Hussein would not receive a single cent in royalties.

And rightly so! Under Saddam Iraq had declined to join an international treaty on copyright and publishing royalties. In an attempt to recoup any potential losses, Saddam made unauthorized use of a kitsch painting by a North American artist on the cover of the Arabic edition of his novel. The artist, keenly aware that even the slightest hint of complicity with the Iraqi dictator could abruptly end his career, panicked and responded by slandering his plagiarizer in the strongest possible terms. In keeping with the country's reservations vis-à-vis the invasion of Iraq, in Germany the tyrant's writings were afforded a rather more nuanced treatment. German publishers "de facto" offered this appraisal.

There is no doubt that the novel takes its cue from the folk tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. But the framing device used here is a different one. In Saddam's novel the narrator explains that the story was first recited to him as a child in his grandmother's wretched abode—a woman whose resolute, wise, and caring nature was typical of Iraqi women. Zabiba herself also comes from humble origins. The girl's name, which means "raisin" (specifically grapes dried on the vine), was given to her because her mother so desperately wanted to eat raisins during her pregnancy, but was too impoverished to satisfy her cravings with even a single raisin. Among the few rights afforded women was the privilege of naming any female offspring, and so when her daughter was born she named her "Raisin." The story is reminiscent of the classic fairy tale of Rapunzel and this maternal aspect is one of the few moments of tenderness in the novel.

The author is clearly moved by the woman's plight and *she* is allowed to triumph. A wise and intelligent young woman, Zabiba gains the confidence of her king. Their relationship gives the regent cause to question the unhappy and isolated existence that he leads in the seclusion of his gloomy palace. Like a latter-day Scheherazade, Zabiba brings the monarch to his senses and instills in him the courage to become a better man. The king becomes a champion for his people, and the two die as martyrs. Much of this narrative is sketched out in vague terms. Finally, a popular assembly is convened and a tribunal is staged to pass judgment on the old regime. It seems hardly coincidental that the people decide to commemorate the death of the protagonists on 17 January, a date which marks the beginning of America's 1991 campaign against Iraq.

It does not take an intelligence analyst to spot the novel's allegorical qualities: Zabiba represents the people, while the king represents Saddam. The love that joins them is a law of nature that transcends the social conventions of human society. Within the course of the narrative, both scornfully dismiss the demands and interests of their lawfully wedded partners. A commoner, Zabiba is afforded an opportunity to humiliate the queen; and when Zabiba is raped by her legal husband, he is punished harshly by the king.

But how does the book actually read? According to one blogger, the novel is no worse than one of Stephenie Meyer's atrocious vampire sagas. That may well be true, but that is merely to dismiss the novel out of hand. Set in their ways, Western literary critics have so far failed to get a grip on Saddam's writings in both their more apologetic and critical approaches. Once could scarcely refer to the blurb in the book jacket of the German edition as sincere. But, in her self-righteous discontent, the novel's reviewer at the Swiss daily *Neuen Züricher Zeitung* manages to overlook some of its key aspects. At the close of her article, the reviewer comments drily on the monarch's narrow brush with death by poisoning. At once pretentious and moralizing, this ironic treatment is wearying. What the reviewer fails to recognize, is that literature of this kind is not a matter of individual taste; Saddam takes what he can get, appropriating Iraqi and foreign traditions, molding them to his own ends and forging from these disparate elements his battle cry. A battle cry is no trivial matter—neither for the warrior, nor for those who hear his cry. Literature of this kind is not aesthetically pleasing; it is duty to the death.

Zabiba is not believed to have been written by Saddam alone and the fate of his assistant testifies to this deadly principle. According to the man's widow, he was summoned from his office by Saddam and given just three days to draft the novel from the dictator's notes—a story that in itself sounds like something out of *One Thousand and One Nights*. When he returned home in the evening he informed his children: "Uncle has given me a special job to do." The man died a short time after when he collapsed after drinking from a jug in his kitchen at home (one has to wonder whether chamomile tea was involved here, too). Nobody harbored any doubts as to who was responsible for his death. Saddam's habit of tying up any loose ends was common knowledge.

As noted above, Saddam wrote another three novels. Leila procured them for me through an acquaintance in Jordan, where, she assured me, the major smuggling routes of the Orient converge. As they are written in Arabic, I can't actually do much with the novels except to study their covers and weigh them in my hands. The books are large-format paperbacks, printed on thick paper, dog-eared and scuffed.

One of the books—Saddam's first novel, is titled *Men and the City* and tells the story of the rise of Saddam and his party. The cover is illustrated with a picture of the street in Baghdad where he was to have committed his first political murder and the swanky yellow limo that he was supposed to blow up. The book's crowded cover also features an Arab warrior mounted on a charging warhorse; an eagle draped with the Iraqi flag and adorned with an engraved medallion in the shape of a heart; and a mosque illuminated by a crescent moon held in the embrace of a palm frond. The cover is wildly colorful and quite fantastic, but its composition is haphazard at best.

The Fortified Castle (Al-Qala-ah Al-Hasinah) is the largest of the three books and features an even more garish cover, complete with gold-embossed lettering. The cover illustration depicts a proud and beautiful woman against a riotous backdrop of minarets and missiles; she is joined by another horse and rider—his cloak and mane whipped by the wind—above a modern artillery piece. The book recounts the story of an Iraqi tribe through the centuries. "Is it possible to live without a cause?" Leila translates. "One can live without a cause, but only a stunted existence much like bees, ants, deer, wolves, tigers, lions and their young, jackals and birds, hedgehogs and insects. But did God create man to live like this, for his instincts alone? Only pagans say such things." A writer schooled in the rhetorical styles of the West would have noted that the list seems overwrought and abridged it accordingly—or at least cut out the hedgehog.

As the United States stepped up the pressure on Iraq in the weeks and months before the launch of the invasion in 2003, Saddam strived passionately to complete his final novel. The book was completed practically on the eve of battle and most of the print run was destroyed. The book's cover is plainer than its predecessors and features a portrait of the author against a white backdrop—the quality of the printing seems uneven. The title does not translate well and English-language editions include such variations as *Devil's Dance*, *Begone, Demons!* and *Get Out of Here, Curse You!*

Leila translates the title into German for us as *Komm raus aus ihr, du Verfluchter* (Get out of here, you accursed one) and we are surprised at her choice of the female possessive pronoun. We are unable to pin down this point of reference. As far as I can gather, the book deals with the struggles of the Arab peoples, in this case against a Satanic–Zionist conspiracy of global proportions. The Arabs, led by the narrator, Abraham, invade the lands of their enemies and destroy their two mightiest towers. Was Saddam somehow seeking to symbolically atone for the attack on the Twin Towers after his involvement in the events of 11 September 2001 had been disproved despite the Bush Administration's efforts to link him to the terrorist attacks? In a certain sense, this new war had made an innocent victim of Saddam. As a tyrant he could not countenance this affront.

Saddam's legacy includes one final literary work. And while he was not the author of this work, it is in a sense perhaps his most personal work. Over the course of a year around twenty-six liters of blood were drawn from the dictator's veins in some fifty sessions. The blood was used to make a copy of the Qur'an. As far as gestures go, it is an act which seems at once crude and devout, presumptuous and humble—a textbook example then of the unbreakable bonds that joined his destiny to that of his people. The one true scripture was to flow from his blood, the truth of the world *in its entirety*. When Faust made his pact with the devil, just a single drop of this precious liquid sufficed for his signature and the rest of the document was written in ink. The tyrant, on the other hand, filled hundreds of pages with his blood. The book is believed to be held in a museum and its existence presents Muslims with a dilemma: while the Qur'an is holy, blood, all blood, is held to be impure. The mere existence of this book is a sacrilege.

Eight years have passed since Saddam Hussein was decisively defeated, hunted, captured, and brought before a court of law. He was to be tried for the murder of 290,000 people. During this time he wrote his last poem, which includes the following lines:

Here we unveil our chests to the wolves
And will not tremble before the beast.
We fight the most difficult challenges
And beat them back, God willing.

While the Americans did their best to present a wretched image of Saddam to global media as they dragged him dazed and confused from his hole in the ground, they would have much preferred a dignified and orderly execution. But things did not turn out that way. The deep-seated hatred precipitated by Saddam's thirty-five-year reign of terror welled to the surface and undermined proceedings.

Even the site of his execution was inspired by a spirit of vengeance. Saddam was killed close to the location of a meat grinder used by the dictator to slay his opponents. "A meat grinder?" I ask doubtfully. "Yes, precisely," reply Leila and Yusuf, "a meat grinder, like the ones used to make hamburger meat, but bigger." The victims were fed into the device and ground into pieces while still alive. Saddam was jeered and humiliated as he made his way to the gallows. His hanging was filmed secretly and the shaky footage was a hit on the Internet. The executioners allegedly included several of Saddam's arch enemies, who, it is claimed, paid massive bribes for the privilege of personally wreaking revenge on the former dictator. Their appetite for vengeance, so it seems, could be satisfied by no other means than by their personal involvement. According to rumors, they each paid as much as one million dollars for the privilege. The rule of law was powerless against this primal urge. We can only guess at the satisfaction they must have felt in that moment—a satisfaction that only reflected Saddam's own methods.

President George W. Bush also felt the need to somehow participate in this event, if only symbolically, and took Saddam Hussein's pistol into his possession. One can only wonder what he felt when he first held the gun in his hands. Unlike his opponent, President Bush never had to fear for his life in a war that was decided in his favor before it had even begun. What did it feel like to hold this hand-me-down from Iraq's hands-on tyrant?

Perhaps Bush's ghost writer will have something to say about this one day?

Translated by Damian Harrison

Saparmyrat Niyazov (1940–2006)

“You Are Turkmen” (2001)

Let's, O my heart, walk my heart. Let's look around our land.
With lions in its fields, the beautiful land of Turkmen,
Now the day has come for the poor, sad, brave, men,
You are the Turkmen, with such heroes like Jeleleddin.

Let's select a thousand-winged horse
And travel praying over her plains and mountains
And seek for the ancestors who became part of them,
And You are the Turkmen which hosts 360 saints

The old people are as wise as Gorkut
The mothers are as merciful as Yunus
If you feel lonely and sigh, you see compassion
You are the Turkmen with beautiful houri-like girls like Agayunus

You are braver than the brave, just find an opponent as you are
You are a lion more than a lion, just find a battle field for you
Let your cream boil over always, never feel the lack of it,
You are the Turkmen, with Garagum, so many minerals in its core

History is your ancestors and grand children
And grandfathers, father, children and nation.
Entering the most fortified palaces with your horse,
You are the Turkmen with strong and agile arms.
The rich and noble are godly like saints
Your horsetail-standard is always hoisted brightly,
You words are fine, pleasing, and heart is illuminated
You are the Turkmen, with his face and heart smiling

Oguz is your forefather, and Gorkut is your master,
Your memory is the history of the sixty ages.
Your Garagum is your table and treasure,
Your provision is blessed, you are the prosperous Turkmen.¹

¹ Saparmyrat Niyazov, “You Are Turkmen,” in *Rukhnama: Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmen* (Ashgabat: State Publishing Service Turkmenistan, 2005), 265f.

Saparmyrat Niyazov's *Ruhnama*: The Invention of Turkmenistan

RICCARDO NICOLOSI

I. *RUHNAME* AND POST-SOVIET TURKMENISTAN AS A PANEGRIC SPACE

An unusual monument can be found in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat. In a vast park that celebrates the post-Soviet independence of the country, in the middle of a broad fountain, there stands a monumental ten-meter-high copy of a book. The cover consists of its title, *Ruhnama*, as well as the name and likeness of the author, Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşı, in gold relief. *Ruhnama* (literally, “The Book of the Spirit”) is the main work of the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmyrat Niyazov (1940–2006), who had himself given the title “Türkmenbaşı” (head of the Turkmen) by the Turkmen People’s Council (Halk Maslahaty) in 1993. The most peculiar thing about this monumental book is the fact that it can be “flipped open” mechanically: When thus opened, a multimedia spectacle begins in which the portrait of Türkmenbaşı’s, manuscript pages of the book and propagandistic films on the “glories” of Turkmen history are projected on the inside of the monument, accompanied by the strains of Turkmen music. The scenes displayed are based on passages in the *Ruhnama*; the solemn reading is transmitted through loudspeakers for everyone in the park to hear.²

² When Niyazov was alive, these “readings” took place every evening; under the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, they were limited to special occasions. On the *Ruhnama* monument in the context of the post-Soviet architecture in the Turkmen capital city, which is designed to celebrate the Niyazov’s cult of personality, cf. Jan Šír, “Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 25 (2008), 203–20, 206f. In addition, see Slavomír Horák, “The Ideology of the Turkmenbashi Regime,” *Perspectives on Euro-*

What at first looks like an “architectural symptom” of the megalomania of a central Asian despot—who by building a cenotaph for his book seems to be taking Horace’s *Exegi monumentum* literally—is instead only one (albeit a particularly striking) manifestation of the ubiquity of the *Ruhnama* in post-Soviet Turkmenistan.³ Since its publication in 2001 and until the death of Niyazov, the *Ruhnama* defined the lives of Turkmen in a virtually dictatorial manner: it was officially recognized as the sole guide to life as well as the most significant basis for the education of all Turkmen from kindergarten to the university.⁴ As part of the radical reform of the education system conducted by Türkmenbaşı, which resulted in a reduction of the minimal number of years for study, the elimination of school subjects, and the closure of faculties, the Academy of Sciences, and the National Library, the *Ruhnama* became the main textbook for students at all levels in all fields of study. Even for obtaining a driver’s license, it became obligatory for citizens to pass a sixteen-hour course on interpreting the *Ruhnama*. In the country’s bookstores, there was little else to purchase besides the *Ruhnama*, printings of which had reached the millions by 2005. State television arranged regular readings of the book,

pean Politics and Society 6.2 (2005): 305–20. Lastly, see also Katrin Heinritz, “Defekte Demokratisierung”—ein Weg zur Diktatur? Turkmenistan und die Republik Sacha (Jakutien) in der Russischen Föderation nach dem Ende der Sowjetunion (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2007), 138.

³ At the latest, this metaphorical equating of literary work with permanent monument became a fixed component of Russian and particularly—as part of the state Pushkin cult—of Soviet culture with Alexander Pushkin’s transposition of Horace’s *Exegi monumentum* (*Carmina* III, 30); cf. A. Pushkin, “Ja pamjatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyj...” [I have erected a monument, not made by human hands...] (1836). In the case of the *Ruhnama* Monument, it is therefore not unlikely that Niyazov, who studied in Leningrad, transported clichés from Soviet culture into the post-Soviet configuration while at the same time exaggerating them grotesquely—a process repeated in so many other areas of his personality cult.

⁴ The *Ruhnama* consist of two volumes: the first volume (English subtitle: *Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmen*) appeared at the end of 2001; the second volume (English subtitle: *The Spiritual Wealth of the Turkmen*) came out in January 2005. Since the second volume is not essentially different from the first one, either in content or in style, the following considerations are focused on the first one: Saparmyrat Türkmenbashi, *Ruhnama: Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmen* (Ashgabat: The State Publishing Service Turkmenistan, 2005). All references are provided with page numbers in parentheses.

and quotations from it “adorned” public spaces—from streets, squares, office buildings, and educational institutions to daily newspapers. As part of the renaming zeal that characterized Niyazov’s regime, the month of September was renamed “Ruhnama” and Saturday was renamed “Ruhgün” (Day of the Spirit)⁵ and now dedicated to study of the *Ruhnama*. Numerous translations⁶ were intended to spread Türkmenbaşı’s “Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmens” throughout the world so that no human being would be deprived of its spiritual benefits: indeed, a copy of the book placed in a satellite has been circling the Earth for several years.⁷ Ultimately Türkmenbaşı’s “holy book” came into competition with the Koran: a copy of the *Ruhnama* had to be displayed at the entrance to every mosque, to be regarded by the faithful as a sacred object. Quotes from the *Ruhnama* even appear alongside Koranic verses on the walls of a mosque that was opened in Niyazov’s home village of Gyp-

⁵ The renaming of September as “Ruhnama” is explained by the fact that Niyazov reportedly completed the writing of the book on 12 September 2001, as “certified” by the handwritten entry on the last page of the *Ruhnama* (398). Following the logic of renewal by means of renaming, as is typical in political upheavals, under Türkmenbaşı new names were given to geographical locations, cities, and all the streets in Ashgabat, as well as all the months and days of the week (see Heinritz, “*Defekte Demokratisierung*”, 135f.). The aim of this measure was to symbolically stage the de-Sovietization of the country by introducing Turkmen names. Cf. here Barbara Kiepenheuer-Drechsler, “Trapped in Permanent Neutrality: Looking behind the Symbolic Production of the Turkmen Nation,” *Central Asian Survey* 25 (2006), 129–41, and 134. On the language policy of Turkmenistan in the context of post-Soviet Central Asian states, cf. Jacob M. Landau and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, *Politics of Language in the Ex-Soviet Muslim States* (London: Hurst, 2001).

⁶ Most of these translations were funded by foreign firms, thereby enabling them to obtain advantages in the Turkmen market. German translations, which cannot be obtained, were prepared by Daimler-Chrysler (vol. 1) and Siemens (vol. 2). This dubious business practice is censured in the documentary *Shadow of the Holy Book* by Arto Halonen (Art Films Production, 2007). Cf. on this matter Robert A. Saunders, “Turkmenistan: Rage against the *Ruhnama*,” *Transitions Online*, 3 March 2009, <http://www.tol.org/client/article/20408-rage-against-the-ruhnama.html> (January 13, 2016).

⁷ Concerning this omnipresence of the *Ruhnama* in post-Soviet Turkmenistan, cf. Slavomír Horák, “Mify velikogo Turkmenbaşı,” *Vestnik Evrazii—Acta Eurasica* 2 (2005), <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/mify-velikogo-turkmenbashi> (January 13, 2016); Kiepenheuer-Drechsler, “Trapped in Permanent Neutrality,” 131; Heinritz, “*Defekte Demokratisierung*”, 171f.

jak in 2004; this mosque, the largest in central Asia, is dedicated to “Türkmenbaşı’s spirituality” (*Türkmenbaşynyň Ruhy metjidi*) and Niyazov is buried there.⁸ So convinced was Niyazov of the sanctity of his book that he declared in 2006 that reading the *Ruhnama* three times would guarantee any believer admission into paradise.

This government-mandated omnipresence of the *Ruhnama* in post-Soviet Turkmenistan can most doubtless be seen in the context of rather excessive cult of personality surrounding Türkmenbaşı. Thanks to his book, he has been proclaimed not only the first man of letters⁹ and historian¹⁰ of the country but even the “last prophet of God.”¹¹ By virtue of the media’s constant highlighting of the symbiosis between author and work, equating reverence for the *Ruhnama* with reverence for Türkmenbaşı, the *Ruhnama* played an essential role in transforming Turkmenistan into an epideictic space, one staging a permanent, unanimous exultation of the person of Niyazov.¹² The *Ruhnama* itself is a constant testimony to Ni-

⁸ Cf. here Šír, “Cult of Personality,” 214; Kiepenheuer-Drechsler, “Trapped in Permanent Neutrality,” 132. Regarding the protests elicited by these measures in the Muslim communities of Turkmenistan, cf. Felix Corley, “Turkmenistan: President’s Personality Cult Imposed on Religious Communities,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 1 March 2005, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522. (January 13, 2016).

⁹ Niyazov also claims to be the author of some volumes of poetry that were published in large printing runs and that became—like the *Ruhnama*—obligatory reading in schools. On the basis of these, Niyazov won the “Magtymguly” (an “international” prize that he established himself in 2002) several times. And, precisely as in the case of the *Ruhnama* (see below), there are legitimate doubts regarding his authorship of these books. It has been reported that, at an official event, Türkmenbaşı read aloud one of “his” best known poems so self-consciously that one might have thought he was looking at it for the first time. Cf. here Slavomír Horák, “Portret prezidenta Türkmenbaşı kak osnova turkmenskogo režima,” *Vestnik Evrazii—Acta Eurasica* 2 (2007), <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/portret-turkmenbashi-kak-mifologicheskaya-osnova-ego-rezhima> (January 13, 2016).

¹⁰ In supplementing the *Ruhnama*, Niyazov is said to have composed a new history of Turkmenistan, acting on a “request” of the People’s Council (Halk Maslahaty). In this connection, the Turkmen press spoke of the superhuman ability of Türkmenbaşı to write a work on his own that would normally have taken many scholars year to complete. However, that book was never published; cf. on this issue Horák, “Portret prezidenta.”

¹¹ Šír, “Cult of Personality,” 214.

¹² On Niyazov’s cult of personality, cf. especially Horák, “Mify velikogo Turkmenbaşı,” and *ibid.*, “Portret prezidenta.”

yazov's self-stylization as a prophet whose divine inspiration is said to give back a lost identity to the Turkmen people in order to guide it into the bright future of a new "Golden Age":

My Beloved People! My Dear Nation! This book, written with the help of inspiration sent to my heart by the God who created this wonderful universe and who is able to do whatever He wills, is Turkmen *Rukhnama* (9).

Rukhnama is the book of unity and togetherness. It is the only source that will connect Turkmen's present and its past (22).

Rukhnama is the veil of the Turkmen people's face and soul. It is the Turkmen's first and basic reference book. It is the total of the Turkmen mind, customs and traditions, intentions, doings and ideals. It will be our legacy to the future after drawing lessons from the past! (24).

Dear Citizens! In a short time, we have established our excellent stable state and taken the first step in our progress. The second step lies in our mind, heart and blood. We shall establish this great transformation with this book entitled *Rukhnama* (26).¹³

Yet, if the significance of the *Rukhnama* had only consisted in its supporting function for the personality cult of Türkmenbaşı, it would still not explain why Niyazov's *magnum opus* has largely survived the dismantling of that cult under the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.¹⁴ While Türkmenbaşı's image has meanwhile disappeared from the public eye,¹⁵ the *Rukhnama* also plays a central role in post-Niyazov Turkmenistan and remains an integral part of new state ideology, notwithstanding Ber-

¹³ This explicit "self-panegyric" takes on unusual form when Niyazov wishes for the *Rukhnama* to have an impact of interstellar dimension: "Nevertheless, *Rukhnama* must be the center of this universe. In this universe, all the current and the future cosmic matters should go on spinning, in *Rukhnama*'s attraction, centripetal force and orbits" (69).

¹⁴ On the new political ideology of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov that is also part of the dismantling of Türkmenbaşı's cult of personality, cf. Slavomír Horák' "Velikoe vrozozhdenie": prodolzhenie ideologičeskoj tradicii Turkmenistana," *Politeks* 5.3 (2009), 108–19.

¹⁵ The most blatant symbolic act in this context was the removal of the golden statue of Türkmenbaşı, which rotated according to the sun, from the top of the so-called "Arc of Neutrality" that dominates the skyline of the post-Soviet Ashgabat.

dimuhamedov's attempts to distance himself clearly from his predecessor.¹⁶ The *Ruhnama* represents one of the few elements of continuity between the old and new regimes; it is no coincidence that it played a major role in the inauguration ceremony of the new president in early 2007.¹⁷

Hence, the importance of the *Ruhnama* in post-Soviet Turkmenistan clearly goes beyond its prominent position in a "totalitarian Disneyland."¹⁸ And despite a number of bizarre bloopers in it, the content does not in the least represent "utter nonsense."¹⁹ My thesis here is rather that the *Ruhnama* plays a central role in the construction of Turkmenistan's national identity after the country's independence in 1991. It serves to (re)invent the Turkmen nation as an ethnic, linguistic, and historical unity—especially through the modeling of the past in terms of a coherent national narrative that culminates in a "Golden Age" under Türkmenbaşı.²⁰ And it is pre-

¹⁶ Despite a fundamental revision of Niyazov's educational reforms, the *Ruhnama* remains under Berdimuhamedov an important element of the Turkmen school and university system. Although *Ruhnama* classes were abolished, Niyazov's work continues to serve as an important textbook for the (official) history of Turkmenistan. Cf. here Naz Nazar, "Turkmenistan: Window Dressing," *Transitions Online*, 1 December 2008, <http://www.tol.org/client/article/21056-window-dressing.html> (January 13, 2016). Every year in September (previously known as the month of "Ruhnama"), many events take place that are dedicated to the *Ruhnama*, including a scholarly conference. In 2008, as one of the first works of the newly established state production facility Turkmenfilm, a film adaptation was produced of some historical episodes from the *Ruhnama* under the title "The Melody of the Soul." Cf. Gul'nara Abikeeva, "Kino i kul'turnye vlijanija v Central'noj Azii," *Neprikosnovennyj zapas* 66 (2009), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2009/4/ab17-pr.html> (January 13, 2016).

¹⁷ Cf. Horák, "Velikoe vozroždenie."

¹⁸ Cf. Erich Follath, "Stalins Disneyland," *Der Spiegel*, 15 January 2001, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-18257548.html> (January 13, 2016).

¹⁹ For example, Sonja Zekri designates a typical passage that she cites from the *Ruhnama* as "preposterous nonsense," which would make "even al-Gaddafi's *Green Book* look as staid as a letter from the tax office" (Sonja Zekri, "Ein Turkmen ist kein Clown," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26–27 February 2011, 2–3).

²⁰ "Invention of the nation" is meant in the sense of classical accounts such as Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2002) and Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–15. On nation-building processes in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union, cf. Graham Smith, ed., *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States* (London: Longman, 1996), 315–409; *ibid.* et al., *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet*

cisely the *Ruhnama*'s status as the literary formulation of a comprehensive nation-building project that makes it indispensable in Berdimuhamedov's new state ideology.²¹

2. MYTH AS HISTORY: NATION-BUILDING STRATEGIES IN THE *RUHNAMA*

At first glance, the *Ruhnama* does not seem to be particularly suited for promoting a nation-building program in a coherent manner, on account of its "chaotic structure."²² In fact, Niyazov's work displays a number of argumentative ruptures, tautologies, and logical contradictions that go along with a stylistic and generic structure that is extremely heterogeneous. Argumentative, narrative, and lyrical passages alternate abruptly and for no apparent reason. And the text mutates continuously between historical and moral discourse, between autobiographical narrative and poetry, and between a plan for development in a bureaucratic register and a prophetic vision of the future. This heterogeneous, even collagelike, structure seems to indicate a (not improbable) collective authorship in which Niyazov's contribution to creating the text was presumably limited to oral additions to certain written passages. This much is suggested by sudden text insertions that begin with the words, "Now I would like to mention ..." (47), "I would like to stress ..." (190), or "I wish to call your

viet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139–64; and Oliver Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). On the post-Soviet nation-building process in Turkmenistan, cf. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "National Identity and Political Legitimacy in Turkmenistan," *Nationalities Papers* 27.2 (1999), 271–90; Ahmet T. Kuru, "Between the State and Cultural Zones: Nation Building in Turkmenistan," *Central Asian Survey* 21.1 (2002), 71–90; and Kiepenheuer-Drechsler, "Trapped in Permanent Neutrality."

²¹ Berdimuhamedov refers to his ideological program as a "great Renaissance" and understands it as a new historical stage in Turkmen history, one which follows the "golden age" of Türkmenbaşı while simultaneously overcoming it. Cf. here Horák, "Velikoe vrozozhdenie." This concept thus makes use of the historical model of the *Ruhnama* but merely adds a new stage to it.

²² Horák, "Mify velikogo Turkmenbaşı."

attention to ...” (221). Nonetheless, authorship is crystal clear in the case of the numerous passages taken verbatim *from* other works.²³

Moreover, the division into five sections—“Turkmen” (9–76), “The Turkmen’s Path” (77–142), “Turkmen Nation” (143–204), “The State of Turkmen” (205–76), “The Spiritual World of the Turkmen (277–398)—does not help to provide any systematization of the content. And yet, Niyazov still succeeds in formulating a self-coherent clear image of the Turkmen nation, doing so not by rigorous argumentation but instead using a spiral structure in which a few specific theses and thematic units are repeatedly taken up and then expanded on. Within this “unstructured structure,” the multiple repetitions fulfill the function of affirming by iteration the same claims, one that are only weakly justified in terms of argument.²⁴

Among the thematic leitmotifs in the *Ruhnama*, the starring role is played by the summary statement of the Turkmen stories from its beginnings to the present. The modeling of the national past is built on several recurring motifs concerning certain aspects of post-Soviet Turkmenistan, such as the country’s neutrality, its political unity (in opposition to its traditional tribal culture), its autocracy and paternalism, and Niyazov’s autobiographical story. The theses (still to be elucidated below), when connected with these other thematic units, are substantiated exclusively by the version of Turkmen history presented in the *Ruhnama*. The integration

²³ In particular, Niyazov makes generous use of Clifford Edmund Bosworth’s *Islamic Dynasties: A Chronological and Genealogical Handbook* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981). On this matter, cf. Čoušir Toppyev, “Saparmyrat Nijazov pojman na vorovstve,” *Erkin Turkmenistan*, 3 June 2003, <http://www.erkin.net/chronicle2/news800.html> (January 13, 2016).

²⁴ This frequent repetition of theses and thematic units on the microstructural level communicates a pronounced tendency to tautology. In his remarks on the attitude of the Turkmen people toward the fundamental Islamic categories *harām* (unlawful, forbidden) and *halāl* (lawful, commended), one reads, for instance: “The Turkmen nation loves what is *halāl*, so they do not eat or commit what is *haram* for themselves or for their children.... The thing that Turkmen hate most is *haram*. I hope that our honorable people will live within the fold of *halāl*. May Turkmen meals be *halāl*! *Halāl* elevates the Turkmen toward the sky! The way of Turkmen is the way of *halāl* (181). The numerous tautologies produce a mantra-like effect that recalls the “hypnotic function” of similar stylistic features in Stalin’s prose. Cf. Mikhail Vajskopf, *Pisatel’ Stalin* (Moscow: NLO, 2002), 35.

of the central aspects of Türkmenbaşı's regime into the grand narrative of a Turkmen nation acts to legitimize a great man shaped by history.

Although Niyazov maintains that the *Ruhnama* is "a book about the lessons of philosophy and the moral experiences of past generations, rather than a history book" (74)—its longer passages resemble a historical compendium. Particularly in chapters 2 and 4, ancient and medieval empires as well as dynasties of (alleged) Turkmen ancestry are listed and supplied with family trees. The sheer quantity of the names, dates, and facts provided generates a pseudo-scientific tone that is evidently intended to support the historical construct of a five-thousand-year-old Turkmen nation. Particularly striking in this construct is its offensive propagation of a Turkmen-centric vision of world culture:

My purpose in writing *Rukhnama* is to express explicitly how the nation has contributed much to the sciences, literature, civilizations, and development of the world and in every area of life.... In this way, the scientific achievement of the Turkmen nations became the ferment of European scientific advancement. The Turkmen wheel precipitated the scientific progress of the world. The lifestyle of the Turkmens made a great contribution to the improvement of science, production and industry. (6of.)²⁵

But unlike these quotes suggest, Niyazov's reinvention of Turkmen history does not primarily serve to distinguish Turkmenistan to the outside world as the cradle of civilization. Rather, its primary function to model a national identity intended to function as a tool for legitimating the political structures of post-Soviet Turkmenistan. For this reason, Türkmenbaşı claims for the *Ruhnama* an exclusive position in the nation's history. It is deemed the only true source of historical knowledge about the Turkmens, for it also revises earlier conceptualizations of Turkmen history that were biased:

The *Rukhnama* ... is the only source that will connect Turkmen's present and its past. Up until now, there were a number of words, special words,

²⁵ Regarding additional phantasmagoric claims of Turkmen "scholars" who in the wake of the *Ruhnama* have postulated, for instance, that the Turkmens invented writing or that the Turkmen legal tradition influenced the US constitution, cf. Horák, "Mify velikogo Türkmenbaşı."

but not a whole word. *Rukhnama* should fill this gap. *Rukhnama* should place in the hands of Turkmens their unique and whole history, and spiritual striving. (23)

One of the troublesome aspects of Türkmenbaşı's regime was that the emphatically declared unique position of the *Rukhnama* was not least achieved by the destruction of 25,000 history books that were held to be inconsistent with Niyazov's concept.²⁶ Scientific criteria play no role in the *Rukhnama*, anyway. The construction of a coherent historical development—one that does not know any contingencies but only recurring regularities—takes place without making any reference to historical sources or to categorical distinctions between myth and history. Only in this way can Niyazov showcase for his people a history whose different phases function according to an invariable logic, as hypostases of an unchangeable basic structure. As a result, Türkmenbaşı is able to link past with present, both explicitly and implicitly, so that Turkmen readers will be able to draw the "correct" conclusions from their own history:

Rukhnama is a book which advises so that Turkmens may not repeat in the future mistakes from their past, and so that they may always and everywhere be an example and show the way. I believe that *Rukhnama* will be one of the first guides of the Turkmens. (237f.)

In order to achieve this goal, Niyazov creates in almost 300 pages a blatantly obvious image of post-Soviet Turkmenistan as a new "Golden Age" for the Turkmen nation, now able to create a separate state for the first time in its history.²⁷ Here the construction of the national past does more to legitimize that state's fledgling existence than to equip it with a tradition that is the most ancient or culturally homogenous one. More precisely, the aim of Niyazov's fashioning of history is to justify his totalitarian ideology as a historical necessity.

²⁶ Here cf. Kuru, "Between the State and Cultural Zones," 77.

²⁷ The entire second chapter and parts of chapter 4 (205–76) and chapter 5 (277–398) are devoted to portraying Turkmen history, whereas the same information is repeated from chapter to chapter in increasingly concise form.

Without referring the indisputable historical fact that Turkmenistan emerged only in the Soviet period and only as an artificial entity,²⁸ Niyazov ascribes the origin of the Turkmen nation to the mythical commander Oghuz Khan, who, as a “direct descendant of Noah” (207), founded the first Turkmen state 5,000 years earlier.²⁹ At the same time, Oghuz Khan created the Turkmen “spirit” which has continued to preserve “its peculiarity” over five historical epochs (281). The succeeding periods are characterized so that they appear as hypostases of a cultural, historical, ethnic and linguistic unity, one remaining consistent at its core. These civilizational epochs are identified with mythical or historical figures that constitute a prophetic lineage ending with Türkmenbaşı who combines all the characteristics of his predecessors in himself. There is firstly Dede Gorkut, the hero of an eponymous Turkish epic who unites the Turkmen spirit with that of Islam. Secondly, there is Seljuk Khan, founder of the dynasty of the Seljuks and personification of “Era of the Sword” (282), i.e., the political expansion of the Turkmens that led to the establishment of various kingdoms such as the Seljuk and the Ottoman empires. Lastly, there is the poet Magtymguly Pyragy (1724–1807), whose art sustained the Turkmen spirit through a phase of political decline.³⁰ Following the Soviet period, in which the Turkmen people “lived in the ruins of their spirit” (286)

²⁸ Up to the point when the Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan was established, the Turkmen tribes had been organized in mutually hostile federations that were unfamiliar with state formation and that lived in political anarchy. Cf. here Heinritz, “*Defekte Demokratisierung*”, 85ff. On the construction of Turkmen identity in the Soviet era, cf. Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁹ The territory of present-day Turkmenistan was settled by Turkic Oghuz tribes only in the fifth or sixth century CE. The name “Turkmen” for designating these tribes appears for the first time in Arab sources at the end of the tenth century. Cf. Here Marie-Carin von Gumpenberg and Udo Steinbach, eds., *Zentralasien. Geschichte. Politik. Wirtschaft. Ein Lexikon* (Munich: Beck, 2004), 284.

³⁰ The legitimization of Türkmenbaşı’s leadership takes place by staging a magical-mystical communication between him and his “predecessors,” at the end of which he is enthroned by the spirits of his parents as the new prophet of the Turkmen nation: “Allah selected the four heroes of the Turkmens—Oguz Khan, Gorkut ata, Gorogly and Makhtumkuli—as the inheritors of the prophets. Today, Allah the Great has designated you as their inheritor. Son, devote your life to maintaining the unity of the Turkmen nation and to sustaining the golden life for them” (144f.).

because their identity was negated, the (proverbial) Turkmen spirit entered its “Fifth Golden Age,” the age of its “maturity,” after the country achieved independence in 1991:

The 5th Golden Age of the National Turkmen spirit starts on 27 October 1991. In fact Allah the Almighty decreed an interesting fate for our nation. The Turkmen spirit rises at the beginning of each millennium. This was the same for the beginning of the third millennium. Allah the Almighty granted the return of historical creative inspiration to the Türkmen. This is the age of maturity for the Turkmen spirit. (287)

The fact that events and historical phases in this history schema have a purely structural function that makes them arbitrarily malleable is shown in particular by the conceptualization of the most recent (i.e., Soviet) past of Turkmenistan. The oft-repeated assertion that the cultural identity of the nation was suppressed and the country was exploited in the Soviet era obviously serves to present Turkmenistan’s independence and the beginning of Niyazov’s reign as an epochal change in the country’s history. In order to shape this (argumentatively) important dichotomy between a glorious “now” and a gloomy “past,” Türkmenbaşı must nonetheless completely rewrite the most recent past. For it was only on account of the Soviet Union that Turkmenistan (established in 1924) ever achieved a national identity. Furthermore, it is paradoxical that Niyazov in the case of “his” Turkmenistan falls back on the criteria of national identity (unity of language, territory, economy, and cultural history) that were worked out by Stalin in the 1930s,³¹ whereby Niyazov unsurprisingly replaces the teleological model of historical materialism with the mythical conception of the recurrence of golden ages.

³¹ Here cf. Kuru, “Between the State,” 71.

3. PAST PRESENT, PRESENT PAST: MYSTIFYING HISTORY TO LEGITIMATE POWER

This mythical dimension of Turkmen history with its cyclical time structure and its consistent ethnic, linguistic, and spiritual core allows Niyazov to regard the key elements of his ideology as constants in the past of the nation—thereby legitimizing the need for them.³² Türkmenbaşı's policy of combining authoritarianism with paternalism, for instance, finds its historical justification in the “last will and testament” of Oghuz Khan. It references the necessity of autocracy: “Two persons should never be your rulers at the same time. If there is one Han it means order, but two Hans means disorder” (99), while at the same time calling on the ruler to be merciful: “The ruler is the father of the orphans and the homeless. The ruler must show a father's concern for them” (89).³³

As a milestone in post-Soviet policy toward Turkmenistan, Türkmenbaşı proclaimed not only the new state's independence but also its status of “permanent neutrality,” as officially recognized by the UN in 1995. This status was presented as one of the main pillars of Niyazov's ideology.³⁴ Its significance lay primarily in justifying the country's absolute isolation that closed it off from outside influences.³⁵ The neutrality of Turkmenistan is represented in the *Ruhnama* as a fulfillment of an ancient dream, anchored in the origins of the nation:

³² On the role of mythological thinking in Türkmenbaşı's ideology, cf. Slavomír Horák and Svetlana Riazanova, “Mifologičeskoe i religioznoe v ideologii postsovetsskogo Turkmenistana,” *Politeks* 2 (2006), 323–31.

³³ Niyazov's absolutism merged despotic control over all spheres of Turkmen life, the suppression of any form of dissent, and a paternalistic system of subsidies under which gas, water, electricity, housing, and basic foodstuffs were provided to the Turkmens at token prices or without cost. Cf. on this Heinritz, “*Defekte Demokratisierung*,” 149ff.

³⁴ The day of the UN resolution, 12 December, was proclaimed a national holiday, and the month of December was renamed as “Bitaraplyk” (Neutrality). In the panegyric architecture of Ashgabat, pride of place—in a geographical sense as well—was taken by the so-called “Arc of Neutrality.” Cf. here Šír, “Cult of Personality,” 205.

³⁵ On this matter, cf. Kiepenheuer-Drechsler, “Trapped in Permanent Neutrality,” 136f.

Constant Neutrality was the second foundation we achieved on independence. It was Oguz Khan's wish and prayer uttered five thousand years ago that our land may be at peace forever. Our ancestors' belief was always that our blue sky should be dominated by peace and tranquility. (236)

To reaffirm this argumentation, Niyazov repeatedly points to the love of peace as a major feature of the Turkmen people:

To be respectful to other nations and to respect and revere the faiths and principles of the adherents of other religions lies in the Turkmen's blood. The Turkmen are of a nation which is generous, humanitarian, just, open-hearted, patient, contented and sincere. Showing the utmost respect to other nations has always been a characteristic of the Turkmen. (258)

Although Niyazov restricts himself to making claims that are general and not historically contextualized, he must nonetheless accept that his historical construct features a flagrant paradox in this respect: the principle that the Turkmen are peace-loving clashes with the principle of incorporating all of the Turkic dynasties into the history of the country. To do so thus means including the Mongols as well, along with Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, their anything-but-peaceful generals. Yet since the fictional rewriting of history is reaching its limits here, Niyazov simply declares the Mongols to be *non*-Turkmen, indeed, even enemies of the Turkmen nation:

The Turkmen nation has been able to survive the ruthless cruelties and destructions of Alexander the [G]reat, Chenghis Khan, Tamurlane and other invaders and managed to transmit its sacred values, name, honour, traditions and civilization, the legacies of Oguz Khan, to the glorious days of the contemporary era. (147)³⁶

In the case of this strategy, which legitimates Niyazov's ideology by linking it back to the (fictional) history of Turkmenistan, a central role is played by the permanent repetition of the need for national unity and integrity:

³⁶ On this paradox, cf. Horák, "Mify velikogo Turkmenbaši."

"The Turkmen nation has been reborn as a whole. To have an independent and impartial state is only possible by the unity and indivisibility of the nation" (148).

Those litany-like iterations are not poetic ornament but fulfill a certain argumentative function, serving to contest the traditional tribal culture of Turkmenistan and its political and social power. The division of the Turkmen into rival tribes and tribal federations had been considered in Soviet times an obstacle to realizing political unity.³⁷ The Soviet government attempted to resolve this problem by creating a (precarious) balance between the centralizing power of the party and the local power of the top five tribes (Teke, Yomut, Ersary, Salyr, and Saryk).³⁸ However, this tribal structure proved incompatible with Türkmenbaşı's absolutism. Although the tribal elders were conceded a symbolic voice with the founding of the Council of Elders (Aksalks), their influence was extremely limited.³⁹ The *Ruhnama* repeatedly presents tribalism as a relic of the past, something that is opposed to the idea of the nation and its realization:

Within the golden personality of Turkmens, national feelings and values must be to the fore and other ideas, such as tribalism and racism must be eradicated in the golden era. In order to eradicate them, we must abandon the outdated process of identification of tribal differences. (200)

In retrospect, the division into tribal federations and the discord between them is regarded as the primary cause of the decline of the Turkmen nation in the eighteenth century:

³⁷ On this issue, cf. Šochrat Kadyrov, *Nacija plemen. Etničeskie istoky, transformacija, perspektivy gosudarstvennosti v Turkmenistane* (Moscow: RAN, 2003); Paul Georg Geiss, "Turkman Tribalism," *Central Asian Survey* 18 (1999), 347–57.

³⁸ On this issue, cf. Slavomír Horák, "Changes in the Political Elite in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 8 (2010), 27–46; here, especially 29–34.

³⁹ Cf. on this issue Heinritz, "Defekte Demokratisierung", 116; Horák, "Changes in the Political Elite," 36. A symbolic acknowledgment of the importance of the tribes for Turkmen culture can also be discerned in the design of the national flag, on which five stars and five carpet patterns are displayed; these represent both the regions of the country and the largest tribal federations. On this point, cf. Kuru, "Between the State and Cultural Zones," 73.

Remember that Makhtumkuli the Great made great endeavors to give unity and integrity to the Turkmens in [the] eighteenth century. No matter how he tried he could not make others heed his words because there was nobody able to lead the Turkmens. For the leader of one tribe to unite with another, one of the two leaders would have to accept second place, but there was no Khan humble enough to bear to take second place. (166)

To overcome this fatal dichotomy between tribalism and national spirit, there has appeared at the dawn of the twenty-first century the long-awaited figure of Türkmenbaşı to unify the country and lead it into a new golden age. To make this assignment of a prophetic role plausible in terms of mythical typology as well as Niyazov's own life, the *Ruhnama* proceeds to mystify not only the nation's past but also the ruler's biography.⁴⁰

With the help of fragmentary narrative passages, Niyazov narrates episodes from his childhood and youth, in the process presenting himself as someone who through traumatic experiences has acquired the traits that have made him a "Türkmenbaşı." The death of his parents plays the chief role here. His father, Atamyrat Niyazov, about whom there is actually no reliable information, is said in the *Ruhnama* to have been a hero, dying on the battlefield in World War II.⁴¹ At the age of eight, Saparmyrat also loses his mother, his siblings, and his closest relatives in a powerful earthquake that completely devastates the city of Ashgabat in 1948. After the harrowing loss of his entire family, Niyazov is taken in by distant itinerant relatives who compel him to do hard labor. Consequently, little Saparmyrat decides to break with them, moving into a children's home. This step—one that was actually impossible considering the social circumstances of the time—plays an important symbolic role in Niyazov's autobiographical narrative. It manufactures a radical detachment from the social bonds of

⁴⁰ On the mystification of Niyazov's biography beyond the *Ruhnama*, cf. Horák, "Portret prezidenta Turkmenbaşı."

⁴¹ The young Saparmyrat learns of the circumstances of that death from two former comrades of his father whom he meets during his studies in Leningrad. The introduction of these secondary narrative authorities as "eyewitnesses" clearly serves to render the story of the father more plausible. Moreover, it is also significant that these discussions occur during the summer vacation when Niyazov is studying the history of his nation in the library.

tribal culture that predestines Niyazov for the role of “head of all Turkmens.” Türkmenbaşı, who descended from the influential tribe of the Teke, was never officially linked with his tribal ancestry but was depicted exclusively as the leader of a supra-tribal nation, the “father of a great family.” Therefore, no one else—according to the message of the *Ruhnama*—would have been able to create a separate, independent state for the Turkmen nation.

From the foregoing considerations, it ought to be clear that the *Ruhnama* was more than a grotesque exhibit in the totalitarian cabinet of curiosities which Türkmenbaşı had transformed his country into. Rather, the *Ruhnama* played a central role in the construction of cultural identity of post-Soviet Turkmenistan by providing argumentative strategies for modeling a national history that would legitimize Türkmenbaşı's power. What at first glance appears to be the product of an involuntary Dadaism proves on closer inspection to be a construct that is coherent in itself and enormously powerful: the *Ruhnama* constructs the symbolic order of Niyazov's autocratic rule and in the process guides the production of other textual and visual elements in representing his power. As the result of the ongoing isolation of the country, it is difficult to say to what extent Türkmenbaşı's project of the Turkmen nation was able to profoundly shape all this. However, there is a highly revealing scene from the already cited documentary *Shadow of the Holy Book* by Arto Halonen that demonstrates the blatant discrepancy between the omnipresence of the *Ruhnama* in public life under Niyazov and the people's actual knowledge of the book. After a taxi driver interviewed in Ashgabat delivers an enthusiastic paean to the president and his book, he is asked to recall his favorite passages from the *Ruhnama*—a request that he responds to with a long, uncomfortable silence.

Translated by David A. Brenner

Radovan Karadžić (1945–)

Sarajevo (1971)

I hear the misfortune threads
Turned into a beetle as if an old singer
Is crushed by the silence and turned into a voice.

The town burns like a piece of incense
In the smoke rumbles our consciousness.
Empty suits slide down the town.
Red is the stone that dies, built into a house. The Plague!

Calm. The army of armed poplar tree
Marches up the hill, within itself.
The aggressor air storms our souls
and once you are human and then you are an air creature.

I know that all of these are the preparations of the scream:
What does the black metal in the garage have for us?
Look how fear turned into a spider
Looking for the answer at his computer.¹

¹ Radovan Karadžić "Sarajevo (1971)," BBC News, 18 October, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4353554.stm>

“Nothing Is Forbidden in My Faith”: The Metamorphoses of Radovan Karadžić

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

To put it in Heideggerian terms, what is the exact meaning of “is” when we read on the publicity posters for a blockbuster film statements like “Sean Connery *is* James Bond in ...” or “Matt Damon *is* Bourne in ...”? It is not simply a close identification of the actor with the screen hero, so what “we cannot even imagine anyone else playing him.” The first thing to note is that such identity claims always refer to a serial character, so that, in order to grasp the identification at stake here, one should introduce a third term apart from the actor and the screen hero: the screen image of the actor (John Wayne as a tough Western guy, etc.)—it is *this* image, not the real actor, who is identified with the screen hero.

So what about a single (nonserial) role, which gets conflated with the actor? What about a publicity slogan we will for sure never hear: “Anthony Perkins *is* Norman Bates”? As expected, it ruined the actor’s career. When Radovan Karadžić, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs accused of organizing ethnic cleansing, was arrested, it was discovered that in his last years as a fugitive, he was “hiding in plain sight” as a spiritual healer, taking part in forums and lectures that gathered up to several hundred people, and writing as contributor for the *Zdrav Život* (Healthy life) magazine. Can we then also say that “Radovan Karadžić *is* Dragan Dabić”? The latter is not merely a mask of the former, but his “inner truth.” In other words, the relationship between the two is that of a genuine *parallax*. His editor at *Healthy Life*, Goran Kojić, said: “He offered me an article that speaks about similarities and differences between meditation and *tihovanje*

(quietude). I thought the text was really good and published it in several parts in our magazine.”² Here is a passage from the text:

It is not only about the time you spend in prayer, nor the certain position you adopt, but about a series of moments where you dive into yourself (which we could describe as pulling yourself together), where you calm down the passionate and obsessive reliving of everyday life. For each and every housewife, it is that solitary early morning coffee, when the household has still not woken up.³

“Dragan Dabić” is not merely a mask, a fiction constructed to obfuscate Karadžić’s true identity. Of course “Dragan Dabić” is a fiction, a fake persona, but it is here that Lacan’s thesis “truth has the structure of a fiction” acquires all its weight: the fictive person “Dabić” provides the ideological key to the “real” war criminal Karadžić. Here is a saying by psychic healer Dabić, whose treatments aimed at setting free the patient’s “human quantum energy” which links every person to cosmos (we are here firmly in the waters of the Jungian libido): “The basis of every religion is the idea of life as sacred (which sets religion apart from sects).”⁴ Again, we are here immediately thrown into the pagan (pre-Christian) universe of cosmic Life and its sanctity—and, as experience teaches us (and as Walter Benjamin warned us), whenever the sanctity of life as such is proclaimed, the smell of the real blood being spilled is never far away.

Plato’s reputation suffers because of his claim that poets should be thrown out of the city—rather sensible advice, judging from this post-Yugoslav experience, where ethnic cleansing was prepared by poets’ dangerous dreams. True, Milošević “manipulated” nationalist passions—but it

² “Karadžić ‘Practiced Alternative Medicine,’” *b92*, 22 July 2008, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=07&dd=22&nav_id=52109 (January 13, 2016). Cf. Jack Hitt, “Radovan Karadzic’s New Age Adventure,” *New York Times Magazine*, 22 July 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/magazine/26karadzic-t.html> (January 13, 2016).

³ “Dragan Dabic, Columnist on ‘Healthy Life’—and Europe’s Most Wanted War Criminal,” *Independent*, 22 July 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/dragan-dabic-columnist-on-healthy-life-ndash-and-europes-most-wanted-war-criminal-874845.html> (January 13, 2016).

⁴ *Ibid.*

was the poets who delivered him the stuff which lend itself to manipulation. They—the sincere poets, not the corrupted politicians—were at the origin of it all, when, back in the 1970s and early 1980s, they started to sow the seeds of aggressive nationalism not only in Serbia, but also in other ex-Yugoslav republics. Instead of the industrial–military complex, we in post-Yugoslavia had the *poetic–military complex*, personified in the twin figures of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić. Radovan Karadžić, a psychiatrist by profession, was not only a ruthless political and military leader, but also a poet. His poetry should not be dismissed as ridiculous—it deserves a close reading, since it provides a key to how ethnic cleansing functions. Among ancient Chinese proverbs selected personally by “Dr. Dabić,” there is the following one: “He who cannot agree with his enemies is controlled by them.” It fits perfectly Karadžić’s relation with the Bosnian Muslims. Here are the first lines of the untitled poem identified by a dedication “... For Izlet Sarajlic”:

Convert to my new faith crowd
 I offer you what no one has had before
 I offer you inclemency and wine
 The one who won’t have bread will be fed by the light of my sun
 People nothing is forbidden in my faith
 There is loving and drinking
 And looking at the Sun for as long as you want
 And this godhead forbids you nothing
 Oh obey my call brethren people crowd.⁵

The superego suspension of moral prohibitions is the crucial feature of today’s “postmodern” nationalism. Here, the cliché according to which passionate ethnic identification restores a firm set of values and beliefs in the confusing insecurity of a modern secular global society, is to be turned around: nationalist “fundamentalism” rather serves as the operator of a secret, barely concealed *You may!* Without the full recognition of this perverse pseudo-liberating effect of today’s nationalism, of how the

⁵ Translation available online at: “Karadzic’s Poems,” *Frontline* website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/karadzic/radovan/poems.html> (January 13, 2016).

obscenely permissive superego supplements the explicit texture of the social symbolic law, we condemn ourselves to the failure of grasping its true dynamics.

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel mentions the “silent weaving of the spirit”: the underground work of changing the ideological coordinates, mostly invisible to the public eye, which then suddenly explodes, taking everyone by surprise. This is what was going on in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s, so that when things exploded in the late 1980s, it was already too late, the old ideological consensus was thoroughly putrid and collapsed in itself. Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s was like the proverbial cat in the cartoon that continues to walk above the precipice—it only falls down when, finally, it looks down and becomes aware that there is no firm ground beneath its legs. Milošević was the first who forced us all to really look down into the precipice. And to avoid the illusion that the poetic–military complex is a Balkan specialty, one should mention at least Hassan Ngeze, the Karadžić of Ruanda who, in his journal *Kangura*, was systematically spreading anti-Tutsi hatred and calling for their genocide. And it is all too easy to dismiss Karadžić and company as bad poets: other ex-Yugoslav nations (and Serbia itself) had poets and writers recognized as “great” and “authentic” who were also fully engaged in nationalist projects. And what about the Austrian Peter Handke, a classic of contemporary European literature, who demonstratively attended the funeral of Slobodan Milošević? Almost a century ago, referring to the rise of Nazism in Germany, Karl Kraus quipped that Germany, a country of *Dichter und Denker* (poets and thinkers), has become a country of *Richter und Henker* (judges and executioners)—perhaps, such a reversal should not surprise us too much.

We should make a step further here and extend the same logic to the past. Back in June 1998, Carlos Westendorp, the head of the UN administration of Bosnia, outlawed the use of the epic poem/drama *The Mountain Wreath* in the Bosnian schools’ textbooks, claiming that this poem “might offend the national feelings of the Muslims,” and that its author, Petar Petrović Njegoš, was “an ideologue of ethnic cleansing.” One should recall that we are dealing here with not only what is considered the greatest literary work of the entire Serb literature, but with the text which has a mythic status and is considered the founding text of the Serb national identity—

prohibiting this text is something like prohibiting Homer in Greek schools, Shakespeare in English schools or Dante in Italian schools. Many critics dismissed this measure as political correctness brought to extreme, not only a ridiculously anachronistic reading back into history of our post-modern multicultural attitudes and sentiments, but also as a cultural-imperialist imposition of specific liberal sensibilities onto other cultures. So what makes *The Mountain Wreath* such a dangerous text in the eyes of some politicians and cultural administrators?

The poem, written by the Montenegrin prince-bishop Petar II Petrović Njegoš and first published in Vienna in 1847, is vaguely based on a historical event in Montenegro that took place toward the end of the seventeenth century, known as "The Extermination of the Muslim Converts" (in Serb: Istraga Poturica), when Montenegrins decided to simply kill all their compatriots (men, women, and children) who had agreed to being converted to Islam. Its central figure is Prince Danilo, who at that time ruled over the multitude of Montenegro tribes and clans. At a gathering of tribal chiefs which opens the poem, Danilo's warriors suggest celebrating Pentecost by "cleansing" (in Serb: *cistimo*) their land of non-Christians. It is clear to everyone that they are dealing with a conflict among "brothers" of the same blood. In old tribal Montenegro, they had a ceremony to reconcile a blood feud, called *kuma* (godfather); when the Muslims suggest a *kuma* reconciliation, Danilo's men object that the *kuma* ceremony requires baptism. In a very modern way, the Muslim Montenegrins whose representatives also attend the gathering offer an ecumenical analogy, suggesting that the Muslim hair-cutting ceremony is a parallel in their tradition to baptism. Their main argument is a plea for religious tolerance: Why could different religious orientations not coexist within the same ethnic group?

Small enough is this our land,
Yet two faiths there still may be,
As in one *šahan* soups may agree.
Let us still as brothers live,
Of further love no need have we!⁶

⁶ Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath*. Rendered into English by James W. Wiles (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), <http://www.njegos.org/petrovics/wreath.htm> (January 13, 2016).

To these pleas, dismissed by Bishop Danilo as a satanic temptation, his men respond with a stream of scatological insults, accompanied by the chorus chants “*Tako, vec nikako*” (This way, there is no other)—slaughter is the only way. Danilo then orders the total destruction of the Muslim Montenegrins: “Our land is foul—reeks of this false religion.”⁷ In the so-called “Christmas Eve Massacre,” they are effectively all killed: *The Mountain Wreath* ends with the triumphant extermination of all Muslim Montenegrins as a formal initiation of Serb nationhood: the shedding of Muslim blood is presented in itself as an act of baptism:

No single seeing eye, no tongue of Turk,
Escap'd to tell his tale another day!
We put them all unto the sword,
All those who would not be baptiz'd;
But who paid homage to the Holy Child,
Were all baptiz'd with sign of Christian Cross,
And as brother each was hail'd and greeted.
We put to fire the Turkish houses,
That there might be nor stick nor trace
Of these true servants of the Devil!⁸

This, then, is “the case for the prosecution”: in the present situation in ex-Yugoslavia, the basic message of the poem cannot but appear as providing ideological legitimization for the “ethnic cleansing” of the Slavic Muslims in Bosnia, celebrating what can be considered its first paradigmatic case. How can one forget that Karadžić and his companions also perceived themselves as uncorrupted “mountain” people laying the siege on the corrupted valley of Sarajevo, echoing a single most famous line from *Smail-aga Čengić's Death* (1846), another nineteenth-century epic poem: “*Oro gnjezdo vrh timora vije / Jer slobode u ravnici nije*” (The eagle weaves its nest high on a mountain, because there is no freedom in the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. See Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

valley)?⁹ And, effectively, before 1990s, *The Mountain Wreath* was regularly used by the Serb nationalists in this way, as a text which also tells the Serbs how to act today—here is, among others, a fragment from a Serb academic text published in 1930s:

The Turkish power had swept over the Balkans like a tidal wave. Montenegro was the last to be submerged of the Serbian lands, in the beginning of the [sixteenth century]. By the end of the [seventeenth] it began to reemerge into freedom—the first of Serbian lands to do so. But what the Turks could not do by military power, thanks to the inaccessibility of the Montenegrin land, their religion began to do. The spread of Mohammedanism among the Montenegrin tribes became a serious danger. Christianity and nationality with more or less primitive people were the same thing. If Christianity went, national customs went with it. Language would remain, but the people would be cut away from the bulk of the Serbian nation, and would feel like men in a fog. This is what may be seen today in Bosnia: the Mohammedans speak Serbian and consider themselves as Serbs, but the stream of their energy has been blocked, and, not mingling with the current of Christian Serbia, it is flowing nowhere and is stagnating. The racial instinct of the Montenegrins was in mortal opposition to Mohammedanism. According to folk-tradition, Bishop Danilo, at the end of the [seventeenth] or beginning of the [eighteenth century], instigated the eradication of Mohammedanism from Montenegro.¹⁰

So what about the obvious reproach that this line of argumentation is ridiculously anachronistic, projecting into the past modern attitudes, and that, if one reasons in this way, one should no less condemn endless classic works, starting with Homer's *Iliad* which also displays tribal ethics? The problem is that there *were* different attitudes in that time: the poem was written in 1840s, and Njegoš knew his contemporary Romantic and Enlightenment literature and ideology, and, as we have seen, these different

⁹ Ivan Mažuranić, *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (Zagreb: Liber, 1979), 81. For the English translation, see Ivan Mažuranić, *Smail-age Čengić's Death*, trans. Charles A. Ward (Belgrad: Association of Croat Writers, 1969).

¹⁰ Vladeta Popović, "Petar II Petrovic Njegos," *Serb Land of Montenegro: History of Montenegro Online* (originally appeared in as the introduction to first English edition of *The Mountain Wreath*, published by George Allen & Unwin in 1930), <http://www.njegos.org/petrovics/vpopovic.htm> (January 13, 2016).

attitudes are represented within the poem itself, in which the Muslim Montenegrins plea for religious tolerance. Incidentally, the same goes for many other similar cases where the excuse used is that one should not judge the past with today's standards. Here are the orders of George Washington to General John Sullivan, at Headquarters, on 31 May 1779:

Sir,

The expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the six nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents. The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more....

I would recommend that some post in the center of the Indian Country should be occupied with all expedition, with a sufficient quantity of provision, whence parties should be detached to lay waste all the settlements around with instructions to do it in the most effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun but destroyed....

But you will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected—It is likely enough their fears if they are unable to oppose us, will compel them to offers of peace, or policy may lead them, to endeavour to amuse us in this way to gain time and succour for more effectual opposition. Our future security will be in their inability to injure us the distance to which they are driven and in the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire [them].¹¹

Only a decade later, the allegedly less “freedom loving” Jacobins in Paris displayed a much greater fidelity to freedom and equality of all humans, recognizing and enacting full human and political rights of the Haiti rebels. The same double attitude is discernible in Winston Churchill, who wrote at the time of the Boer War: “I am strongly in favor of using poi-

¹¹ “From George Washington to Major General John Sullivan, 31 May 1779,” National Archives, Founders Online, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-20-02-0661> (January 13, 2016). It is worth remembering that, at the time of the war for independence, Washington was the richest man in the thirteen colonies.

soned gas against uncivilized tribes."¹² Whatever one says about Lenin's ruthless exercise of power, using poisonous gas against whole population was beyond his horizon.—Another point to be made is that it is precisely because Njegoš knew of modern universalism that his condoning of the destruction of converted Montenegrins effectively prefigures the specifically modern form of racism, a racism which does not present itself in the terms of the struggle of one particular race against another particular race, but claims for itself universal status, so that the other is not only considered inferior, but denied humanity itself. No wonder that, in his 7 October 1847 letter to Osman-pasha Skopljak, the vizier of Skadar and himself a Muslim Montenegrin (note the involuntary irony of the name: in Serb, "Skopljak" immediately associates with "castrated"), Njegoš wrote: "Firstly what you say is to wash up our hearts and then make nice way and harmony on our borders. My heart is always clean and washed for humans, but with inhuman people a man is forced to behave inhumanly, otherwise he could not, even if he would like."¹³

According to the standard view on *The Mountain Wreath*, its main plot—the extermination of the converts—illuminates the poem's basic theme: the struggle for freedom, justice, and dignity. While fighting to correct a local flaw in their society—the presence of Muslim converts—the heroes fight for ideals which concern all mankind. And, effectively, there is no contradiction between these two levels: it is precisely the universal character of the Montenegrin struggle, i.e., the fact that they stand for universal freedom, justice, and dignity, which excludes their opponents from this universal space.

Walter Benjamin claimed that works of art often function like shots taken on film for which the developer has not yet been discovered, so that one has to wait for a future to understand them properly. This certainly holds for William Shakespeare, whose ability to prefigure insights, which properly belong to the later epochs, often borders on the uncanny. Was

¹² Giles Milton, "Winston Churchill's Shocking Use of Chemical Weapons," *The Guardian*, 1 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2013/sep/01/winston-churchill-shocking-use-chemical-weapons> (January 13, 2016).

¹³ Bishop Petar Petrovic Njegos, "To Osman-pasha Skopljak," *Serb Land of Montenegro: History of Montenegro Online*, <http://www.njegos.org/petrovics/skopljak.htm> (January 13, 2016).

not, well before Satan's famous "Evil, be thou my Good?" from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the formula of the diabolical Evil provided by Shakespeare in whose *Titus Andronicus* the unrepentant Aaron's final words are: "If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul?" Was not Richard Wagner's short-circuit between seeing and hearing in the last act of *Tristan*, which is often perceived as the defining moment of modernism proper (the dying Tristan *sees* Isolde's voice) clearly formulated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? In Act V, Scene I, Bottom says: "I see a voice; now will I to the chink, To spy if I can hear my Thisbe's face," etc. But what if we apply the same logic also to *The Mountain Wreath*? What if the recent "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia should also be used as a developer which only enables us to understand properly the full implications of a centuries-old epic poem?

But why this rise of religiously (or ethnically) justified violence today? Because we live in an era which perceives itself as postideological. Since great public causes can no longer be mobilized on grounds of mass violence, that is, war, since our hegemonic ideology calls on us to enjoy life and to realize ourselves, it is difficult for the majority to overcome their revulsion at torturing and killing another human being. The large majority of people are spontaneously "moral": killing another human being is deeply traumatic for them. So, in order to make them do it, a larger "sacred" cause is needed, which makes petty individual concerns about killing seem trivial. Religion or ethnic belonging fit this role perfectly. Of course there are cases of pathological atheists who are able to commit mass murder just for pleasure, just for the sake of it, but they are rare exceptions. The majority needs to be "anesthetized" against their elementary sensitivity to the other's suffering. For this, a sacred cause is needed. Religious ideologists usually claim that, true or not, religion makes some otherwise bad people to do some good things; from today's experience, one should rather stick to Steven Weinberg's claim that, while, without religion, good people would have been doing good things and bad people bad things, only religion can make good people do bad things.

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